

The Cold War and the American Media in the Fiction of Gore Vidal

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Abstract

This thesis is a reading of the satirical fiction and the political essays of Gore Vidal. It argues that central to Vidal's representation of contemporary America is an understanding that the media have been essential to the maintenance of the Cold War. Throughout this study I emphasise the extent to which this undertaking is distinctly personal. I chart Vidal's progress from a Cold Warrior in the early days of his career to his emergence as a dissident who increasingly understood the image of America advanced by the media to be a fiction. I argue that, as a result of his disillusionment, Vidal came to the conclusion that the principal task of the media is to conceal the political and economic objectives of the federal government.

An understanding of the reasons why Gore Vidal has long termed the period 1945-1950 "the golden age" is essential to a reading of his journey from imperialist to dissident. In this connection I first describe his important childhood influences from the politics of his Southern grandfather, Senator T.P. Gore, to the cinema of the 1930s. From this I establish the boundaries of his political idealism and the extent to which the Jeffersonian principles of his grandfather conflicted with the state interventionism that informed 30s cinema. The main body of the thesis examines how such a contradiction informs Vidal's politics, and the role played by the media in this.

Vidal's work as a writer and a political activist witnesses his quest for the exceptional American nation state endorsed by a grandfather who opposed a strong federal government. In his search for a subject from his first novel, *Williwaw* (1946), to his eighth, *Messiah* (1954), and in his support for John F. Kennedy in the 1960 presidential election, Vidal nevertheless yearned for the strong leader endorsed by 1930s cinema. In reading his novels, plays, essays, and his campaign for election to Congress in 1960, I assess Vidal's vision of a strong America under a strong president. My focus is first on Vidal's understanding of how television drama and advertising had altered American politics, and second on how at the same time he accepted the representation of the Cold War prevalent in the media.

In the following chapters I describe Vidal's disillusionment on realising the extent to which, in the era of the Vietnam war, this representation was a fiction. I examine why he turned against the idea of the strong leader in *Washington, D.C.* (1967), and why he could not find in his grandfather's teachings an adequate resource for dissidence. I then explore his disillusionment throughout the 60s and 70s, the role he believed the media to have played in maintaining the government's representation of America under the Cold War, and the reconciliation in the early 1980s with his grandfather's earlier Populism. To cap this is a reading of *Duluth* (1983), which is an indictment of a culture defined by its television entertainments. In conclusion I outline Vidal's interpretation of America at the end of the Cold War.

Gore Vidal's conclusion that the mass media propagated a fiction which he then embraced led to his emergence as a political commentator of historical significance. This thesis attempts to synthesise historical, literary and cultural sources as a means to drawing out Vidal's importance as an observer of Cold War America.

Key to frequently used abbreviations

Works by Gore Vidal

WDC *Washington, D.C.*

MB *Myra Breckinridge*

RB *Rocking The Boat*

SH *Screening History*

US *United States: Essays 1952-1992*

VFW *Views From a Window: Conversations with Gore Vidal.*

Periodicals/ Newspapers

NYT *The New York Times*

NYRB *The New York Review of Books*

LAT *The Los Angeles Times*

A note on the citation of Gore Vidal's essays

The majority of Gore Vidal's essays are collected in the 1993 publication *United States: Essays 1952-1992*. When not collected here all citations are to the original essay collection. Each is then followed, in brackets, with the original date and place of publication. (This is also the case in interviews cited from the collection *Views From a Window*, although I have only noted the year of the interview in brackets.)

A note on citations from the Gore Vidal archive

An archive of Gore Vidal's work is held at the State Historical Society in Madison, Wisconsin. I have used the abbreviation GVC throughout to denote Gore Vidal Collection. The archive is divided into what is basically two sections. The first includes papers up to and including 1975. The reference number to this section is U.S.Mss10AN, which I have omitted throughout. The second section is made up of unprocessed additions, which are referenced by a number which refers to each additional stack. (For example, MCHC80-098 includes correspondence 1979-1980, and the manuscripts of *Creation*.) I have cited each individual addition.

A general note on footnotes

All references are to Vidal texts unless otherwise stated. The place of publication, unless specified, is New York. When I have not used the first edition I have noted the original date of publication before the date of the edition used. (For example: Edwin R. Bayley, *Joe McCarthy and the Press*, 1981 [1982].) In cases where I cite a certain edition I have not done this. (For example: Walter LaFeber, *America, Russia, and the Cold War*, Eighth Edition [London, 1997].)

CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	ii
Abstract	iii
Abbreviations	iv
1: Introduction	1
2: The Golden Age	9
3: Significant Childhood Influences	33
4: In Search of a Subject, 1946-1954	67
5: The New Frontier, and the Promise of the Golden Age Revived	110
6: The Dissident Politics of <i>Washington, D.C.</i>	149
7: <i>Myra Breckinridge</i> and the Golden Age of Hollywood Cinema	190
8: The Politics of Opposition, 1968-1978	231
9: The Return to Political Activism, 1980-1982	280
10: <i>Duluth</i> and the Political Consequences of Television	301
11: The Systemic Decline of the United States, 1984-1998	340
Appendices	
I: Gore Vidal, Norman Mailer, and the Promise of John F. Kennedy	367
II: The 1961 Conflict with Robert Kennedy	378
III: Two Instances in the Critical History of <i>Myra Breckinridge</i>	382
Bibliography	385

Introduction

Gore Vidal was born on October 3, 1925, at the military academy West Point in the state of New York. His father, Eugene Vidal, was a football coach and aeronautics instructor at the academy. His mother, Nina Gore Vidal, had no profession. In order to pursue a career in civil aviation, Eugene Vidal resigned from the army shortly after his son's birth. The three then moved to the house of Nina Vidal's parents in Washington, D.C. Once there Gore Vidal was often left in the care of his maternal grandparents. This enabled his grandfather, Senator Thomas Pryor Gore, to wield an influence that surpassed any other in his social and political education. Gore was a Southerner who had represented the newly founded state of Oklahoma from 1908 to 1920. In 1930, when his grandson was five, Gore was reelected to the Senate. In 1933 Eugene Vidal likewise took a place in government when he was employed as Director of Air Commerce under the new president, Franklin D. Roosevelt. The positions held by Gore Vidal's father and grandfather throughout the 1930s would provide the foundation for his understanding of the role played by the establishment media in the government of the country.

The question that runs like a thread through Vidal's writing, that of politics and the representation of politics in the media, is founded on his experience in the 1930s. As a child Vidal was instructed in political theory by his blind grandfather, to whom he would read the *Congressional Record*, as well as "history, poetry, economics."¹ Yet although Vidal was a political insider his writings testify that his

¹ *Palimpsest* (London, 1995), 48.

access to current history was primarily through the various forms of media. "It was a family complaint," Vidal recalled, that whenever T.P. Gore made "a major speech in the Senate, he would tell none of us in advance. We would only read about in the papers the next day."² As he read of his grandfather's work first in the newspaper and second in the *Congressional Record*, he would likewise see his father at work in *The March of Time* newsreels which, Vidal wrote, "doted" on him.³ His recollection of the Depression, furthermore, was "more of talk on the radio and in the house than actual scenes of apple-selling in the street." His memory of Roosevelt, his father's employer and his grandfather's political "enemy," was that he was "always in the papers . . . on the radio . . . [and] in practically every newsreel."⁴ According to Vidal's recollections of his childhood, current events were established within the grand narrative of history more through the media than through the principals he personally knew.

As an important factor in his social and political education, the media introduced ideological contradictions Vidal would be forced to confront in his writing. At the house of his grandfather he was educated in a school of political thought contrary to that which was predominant by the end of the 1930s. T.P. Gore was born in Mississippi in 1870. Although he was, Vidal wrote, "a populist turned conservative" by the 1930s, he had started on his political career as a spokesman for the Party of the People, which had been created to counter the problems imposed on the post-bellum South by the industrial practices of the North.⁵ The Party represented the agrarian Populist movement which, as Lawrence Goodwyn wrote, believed the "corporate state would, unless reconstructed, erode the democratic promise of America."⁶ The Party's ideological foundation, the Omaha Platform (1892), outlined

² Ibid., 47.

³ *Screening History* (London, 1992), 35. Herein *SH*.

⁴ Ibid., 19.

⁵ *Palimpsest*, 43.

⁶ Lawrence Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise: The Populist Moment in America* (1976), xiv.

its primary objective to “restore the government of the Republic to the hands of ‘the plain people,’ with whose class it originated.”⁷ It endorsed Jefferson’s proposition that “a wise and frugal government” would be of limited scope, would leave the people “free to regulate their own pursuit of industry and improvement,” and would “not take from the mouth of labor the bread it has earned.”⁸ The Party consequently understood the industrial revolution and the increased centralisation of the federal government to be a threat to this idea. It therefore aimed to restrict the power exercised by the industrial magnates in the government of this new America. Throughout his career T.P. Gore was in the tradition of nineteenth century liberalism. He advocated a limited government which would guard against social and economic abuse on the understanding that “[w]here the power of the government is unlimited the rights of the people are unprotected.”⁹ Throughout the Roosevelt era, by which time liberalism had been remade, and proposed to extend the power of the government in order to “provide specific economic and social benefits,” such principles were at the forefront of the education he bestowed on his grandson.¹⁰

T.P. Gore, who was elected to the Senate as a Democrat after the collapse of the Party of the People, opposed Roosevelt’s New Deal on the grounds that it was a threat to the idea of America. He stood for the old liberal principle that the political institutions defined in the Constitution reconciled “power and freedom” and thus ensured the rights of the people were protected. This Jeffersonian theory of government was based on an understanding of America that would prove to be the political foundation of Gore Vidal’s thinking. Jefferson, Vidal wrote in *The American Presidency* (1998), “was the inventor of the American Idea, which

⁷ ‘The Omaha Platform,’ reprinted in *Builders of American Institutions*, eds. Frank Friedel and Norman Pollack (Chicago, 1963), 352.

⁸ Thomas Jefferson, ‘First Inaugural Address’ (1801), *The Portable Jefferson*, ed. Merrill D. Peterson (1977), 293.

⁹ T.P. Gore, ‘Americanism’ (nd.), 2. This address is held with other papers from the late 30s and early 40s and is characteristic of Gore’s attacks on Roosevelt’s New Deal. ‘Papers of T.P. Gore,’ GVC, Box 132, Folder 4.

¹⁰ William Leuchtenburg, *The Perils of Prosperity* (Chicago, 1958), 137.

reminded the world of American exceptionalism.” This “Idea” was outlined in the Declaration of Independence, which stated that “all men are created equal” and endowed with “certain inalienable rights,” among which are “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” This, Vidal continued, rendered the United States an exception from “the hierarchic class system of old Europe, where the populace were as so many bees to serve the sovereign in her hive.”¹¹ Jefferson maintained that self-sufficiency and a limited government would ensure the exceptionalism of the New World. The Populists believed that the new industrial class of the late nineteenth century, and the power it wielded through its ownership and control of the predominant media, undermined this vision of America. Consequently, the increased powers of government inaugurated under the New Deal, and the subsequent imbalance in the separation of powers between President, Congress, and the Supreme Court, were to T.P. Gore proof that the New Dealers “insist that America is a mistake.”¹²

As tension increased in Europe throughout the 1930s, T.P. Gore reasoned that the Roosevelt administration and the established media likewise threatened the principle of isolationism. Isolationism separated the New World from the Old and was indissociable from exceptionalism. It was defined by the Monroe Doctrine (1823), which declared that “in the wars of the European powers in matters relating to themselves we have never taken part, nor does it comport with our policy so to do.” In his 1935 speech ‘I Hope That We Can Preserve Peace and Prevent War,’ T.P. Gore reinforced this principle and warned against the propaganda which could undermine it. He suggested that the United States had been led into war in 1917 not to protect its own interests, but as the result of a British propaganda campaign, and added that “a review of such propaganda may serve as a warning” now “[w]ar in

¹¹ *The American Presidency* (Chicago, 1998), 10.

¹² T.P. Gore, ‘A Square Deal is the Best Deal’ (nd.), GVC, Box 132, Folder 4.

Europe is imminent.”¹³ Nevertheless, for Gore Vidal the serpent in the Eden of American innocence proved to be a far more sophisticated form of propaganda. In addition to the newspapers and the newsreels, the cinema, the ultimate form of media to be wielded as a political weapon throughout the 1930s, exercised an effect that countered the isolationist teachings of his grandfather.

Through historical epics and crime dramas, much of the cinema screened in the 1930s endorsed the ideas that informed Roosevelt’s New Deal, and prepared for the American entry into the Second World War. These productions were, moreover, screened after the *March of Time* newsreels which proved Eugene Vidal to be, his son later wrote, “a conscious player in the pre-war games.”¹⁴ The understanding that a strong centralised government would ensure the freedom of the people, and that the United States should take its place as the leader of the free world, was central to such propaganda. Vidal notes two such illustrations in *Screening History* (1992). The solution to the question of poverty in the Warner Brothers film *The Prince and the Pauper* (1937) was that a good king would listen to his people. In the British production *Fire Over England* (1937), which demonstrated that “our common Anglo past was again in peril,” the solution to the problem of the dictator, here King Philip of Spain, is the military force deployed by the English Queen Elizabeth.¹⁵ The power of the cinema was that it put forward solutions to problems which paralleled the Depression and the increasing tensions in Europe. That it worked within a fictional narrative rather than on a literal level meant it had the power to circumvent political rhetoric. When the war came it prepared an essentially isolationist nation for its emergence onto the world stage.

¹³ T.P. Gore, ‘I Hope That We Can Preserve Peace and Prevent War,’ *Congressional Record*, August 24, 1935.

¹⁴ *SH*, 36.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 46.

Although he was schooled in an isolationist tradition, Vidal embraced the new global empire when the United States emerged from the war as the predominant world power. The principle of a strong president and a strong centralised federal government nurtured throughout the Roosevelt era was to be the foundation for this empire. As a young writer at the beginning of his career, Vidal foresaw a concurrent golden age for literature founded on the principle of American exceptionalism. "We would have, it was thought, a literature to celebrate the new American empire," he recalled in 1957. "Our writers in reflecting our glory would complement the beautiful hardness of our currency."¹⁶ This idea informed his early fiction and the satire he wrote throughout the presidency of Dwight D. Eisenhower. Even though Vidal opposed the anti-Communist witch hunts of the 1950s, he did so on the premise that, as he wrote in 1961, "the Communist menace outside the country increases" while "inside it decreases."¹⁷ Furthermore, he ran for Congress in 1960 on the understanding that the New Frontier advocated by John F. Kennedy was a corrective to the Eisenhower era. Yet as the New Frontier hardened, and, after the assassination of Kennedy in 1963, the country was formally plunged into war in Vietnam, the illusion of the Cold War could no longer be sustained. The official rhetoric foundered and as a result Vidal began to question the idea of America he had sustained from childhood. His conclusion that the mass media propagated a fiction which he then embraced led to his emergence as a political commentator of considerable historical significance.

An understanding of the role played by the American media throughout the Cold War is, consequently, central to the work of Gore Vidal. In his political commentary and satirical fiction he has written a history of the United States which describes how the media have been used to legitimate this conflict. From the mid

¹⁶ 'Visit to a Small Planet,' *US*, 1160. (*Reporter*, June 11, 1957.)

¹⁷ 'The House Un-American Activities Committee,' *Rocking the Boat*, 73. (*New York Herald-Tribune*, July 14, 1961.)

1960s he has endeavoured to demythologise the orthodox interpretation of the Cold War pervasive throughout the media. He has demonstrated that instead of being a conflict between two superpowers, the Cold War was from the start an ideological construct designed not to “support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures,” as Harry Truman declared in 1947, but to ensure economic expansion.¹⁸ Vidal believed that in order to justify such wars as the small-scale incursions into South America and the full-scale war in Vietnam the media have been used to create a consciousness of war. His conclusion that the principal task of the media is to conceal the political and economic objectives of the federal government is a cornerstone of his writing.

Nevertheless, Vidal is at the same time a product of the idea of America advanced by the media throughout the '30s and '40s. His disappointment at what his country was to become owes as much to his post-Second World War ideals as it does to the teachings of his grandfather. There is, as a result, an ideological contradiction that he wrestles with throughout his work. In his historical novels this is to a great extent under control. In *Burr* (1973), *1876* (1976), *Lincoln* (1984), *Empire* (1987), and *Hollywood* (1989), he is concerned with the evolution of the United States, and although his disappointment informs these books, he is restrained by what he terms “the agreed-upon facts.”¹⁹ In his satirical fiction, on the other hand, the ideological contradictions are essential to the structure and the meaning of the work. These novels are, first, not restrained by fact, and second, Vidal maintains, are more the product of a free association. For instance, *Myra Breckinridge* (1968) “was simply a case where the voice took over, took possession of me.”²⁰ “The unconscious mind,”

¹⁸ ‘The Truman Doctrine,’ March 12, 1947, cited in Harry S. Truman, *Years of Trial and Hope* (1956), 107-108.

¹⁹ ‘Lincoln, *Lincoln*, and the Priests of Academe,’ *US*, 672. (*NYRB*, April 28, 1988.)

²⁰ Jay Parini, ‘An Interview with Gore Vidal,’ *Writer Against the Grain*, ed. Jay Parini (London, 1992), 285.

he recalled, “certainly shaped that book.”²¹ Even the political novel *Washington, D.C.* (1967), which spans the years 1937 to 1952, likewise started with the “image of a boy in a garden at night during a storm.” This meant that, “without conscious effort, a door to my past had opened and I was able to step back into the year 1937.”²² The result is a unique history of the United States throughout the Cold War era which encompasses the idealism of exceptionalist rhetoric and the failure of that idealism. How Vidal would in his political commentary and in his satirical novels approach both the ideological contradictions that define this work, and the role played by the media in the foundation of such contradictions, is the subject of this thesis.

²¹ *Views from a Window*, 105. (1974)

²² ‘Gore Vidal tells about *Washington, D.C.*,’ *The Literary Guild Review*, May 1967, 4.

The Golden Age

The role of the media in the demise of American exceptionalism is a subject central to the work of Gore Vidal. He has argued that this principle, the understanding that government served to advance the inalienable right of the people to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, has throughout the Cold War proved nothing but barren rhetoric. As an advocate for the idea of America as an exception to the imperialism of its European founders, Vidal has sought to demonstrate how the media have consistently used such rhetoric to disguise what is in practice an authoritarian empire. Yet his hostility toward the establishment media is as much a product of disappointment as it is of ideological dissidence. Throughout his career Vidal has held to the conviction that the years from 1945 to 1950 were a golden age for the empire conceived in the wake of the Second World War. His later denunciation of an imperial media that have undermined the very principle of exceptionalism is grounded in this crucial era.

THE CHALLENGE OF THE GOLDEN AGE, 1946-1948

Born in 1925, Vidal was of the generation that reached maturity during the Second World War. The war proved an important dividing line in his life. On July 29, 1943, immediately after graduation from Philips Exeter Academy, Vidal enlisted. He spent the first three months in the Army Special Training Program, from which he was expelled for failing the mathematics and physics courses, followed by a month as an infantry private. In order not to be sent to the front lines as anything other than an

officer he secured a transfer through the West Point Protective Association. He was entitled to do so because both his father and his uncle were graduates of the academy. From Peterson Field, Colorado Springs, where his uncle was head of operations, he qualified as a warrant officer. In November 1944 he was posted to the Aleutian Islands.¹ There he started to write *Williwaw*, the first novel he was to complete. "With the finishing of this book," Vidal later wrote, "my life as a writer began."² This personal and historical convergence was as a result impossible to separate from his eulogy to the golden age.

Williwaw had been accepted for June publication by the time Vidal was discharged in February 1946. He had also secured employment as an editor in the house of his publisher, E. P. Dutton, and was, for the first time, financially independent. "I had saved ten thousand dollars while I was in the army," Vidal wrote in his memoir, *Palimpsest*, and in addition, "my father gave me the bonds that he had set aside to send me to Harvard."³ The war released him from the constraints of school, and the publication of *Williwaw* rendered a university education redundant. His emergence as a writer was as a consequence bound irrevocably to the spoils of war. "The war," as he later told his biographer, Fred Kaplan, "saved my life."⁴ Yet within two years this new-found autonomy came under threat from an ideological conflict with the established press. This raised fundamental questions concerning the ways in which the limits of exceptionalism were policed by the media. These questions would in turn determine Vidal's hostility toward that media and the character of his dissident politics.

¹ Vidal is not particularly candid about this period in his memoir *Palimpsest* (London, 1995), 93-97. Fred Kaplan provides fuller details in his biography, *Gore Vidal* (London, 1999), 164-174.

² 'Author's Note,' *Williwaw*, 1946 (revised edition, London, 1986), 9.

³ *Palimpsest*, 115.

⁴ Kaplan, *Vidal*, 209.

In 1946, at the start of his career, the established press proved instrumental in establishing a name for Vidal. On June 17, the influential *New York Times* book reviewer Orville Prescott celebrated *Williwaw* most notably for its “skill in conveying a sense of atmosphere,” and for its “concentrated” portrait of “isolated men in action.” He concluded that although “[o]ne does not know much about any of these men . . . what one does know seems absolutely authentic.” As for Vidal, Prescott characterised his story as an essentially American one. His achievements were duly noted: the youngest warrant officer in the US Army, an editor in the house of his publisher, and an author at the age of twenty. “Who says there are no opportunities left for bright young men?” Prescott rhetorically asked at the end of his panegyric on the young writer.⁵ On the pages of *The New York Times*, the paper of record, Vidal’s emergence on the literary scene mirrored the post-war confidence of the United States. After the onerous war years both he and his work reinforced the most potent national myth: the dream of success.

The publication of Vidal’s third novel in January 1948 confirmed that the reinforcement of national myths was a prerequisite if one was to receive the endorsement of the established press. *The City and the Pillar* told the story of Jim Willard and his attempt to come to terms with his homosexuality. Orville Prescott refused to review the novel. Instead, in an one-hundred and seventy word notice, the *Times* reviewer C.V. Terry concluded that whereas “Vidal’s *Williwaw* was more than merely promising,” now “he has produced a novel as sterile as its protagonist.”⁶ The contrast with the “masculine book” *Williwaw*—which, wrote Jonathan Davies in *The Saturday Review of Literature*, was “straight out of nature”—proved widespread.⁷ In the *Atlanta Constitution*, Sterling North wrote that although Vidal was “one of the most promising writers of his generation” he had “squandered his undeniable talent

⁵ Orville Prescott, ‘Books of the Times,’ *NYT*, 17 June 1946, 19.

⁶ C.V. Terry, ‘The City and the Pillar,’ *NYT*, January 11, 1948.

⁷ Jonathan Daniels, ‘Dirty Weather,’ *Saturday Review of Literature*, July 6, 1946, 27.

in revealing the intricately perverse world of sexual abnormality of which most Americans are relatively ignorant.” He concluded that it was a book that should be in a psychology library, “not in the hands of effeminate boys pampering their pathological inclinations.”⁸ Whereas *Williwaw* was celebrated for its masculine vigour, *The City and the Pillar* was derided for its representation of homosexuality as of an equal social legitimacy.

The press reaction to *The City and the Pillar* mirrored the post-war cultural anxieties. As early as August 1945 the liberal journalist Bernard de Voto observed that a new conservatism threatened to overwhelm American society. This trend, he wrote, was marked by an increasing opposition to the social reforms of the New Deal, and based on the understanding that to defend against a perceived threat to “initiative and profit, business and freedom” in the new era of economic prosperity, one should drive out “the communist professors—who are all homosexuals and New Dealers anyway—and everything will be alright once more.” Although this was, as De Voto continued, a stand “easily polarized by a rabble-rouser or an honest deluded man,” it struck a majority chord.⁹ This was evident in the work of the House Un-American Activities Committee, which used the charge of Communism in effect to suppress dissidence in any form. From its inception in 1938 the Committee had been allied with “the hate underworld,” as Frank J. Donner noted in *The Un-Americans* (1961), which then “gave HUAC names, propaganda, and political support.” From 1945 to 1947 moreover, the Committee was dominated by the Mississippi Congressman John Rankin, who “had been honored by the Nazis and did not hesitate to attack Jews and Negroes as inferior peoples whenever he found an opportunity.”¹⁰ As a great majority of the country drifted back toward the political right such intolerance was given serious credence. Social and political difference was therein

⁸ Sterling North, ‘Slimy Subject is Dignified,’ *Atlanta Constitution*, February 8, 1948.

⁹ Cited in Eric F. Goldman, *The Crucial Decade* (1956), 7.

¹⁰ Frank J. Donner, *The Un-Americans* (1961), 28.

equated with Communism and rendered a legitimate target for censure. The established press observed this trend in its reaction to *The City and the Pillar*.

Consistent throughout the reviews of *The City and the Pillar* was, as a result, a judgement that would in fact persist throughout Vidal's career. In the Connecticut *Courant*, Patricia Bennett complained that Vidal had not offered a reason for why Willard "is abnormal nor is any solution suggested." She concluded that criticism of the domineering American mother did not prove rationale enough, for "it is a well known fact that homosexuality is far more prevalent in European countries."¹¹ This may be absurd, but the significant point is that Vidal is allied not with the New World but the Old. Likewise, in a review for *Best Sellers*, Victor R. Yanitelli accused Vidal of misusing the political freedom of the New World "as the rationale for perversion." He thundered that as "[m]any sins have been committed in the name of freedom—witness the brutal lie of Soviet Communism"—so *The City and the Pillar* read as a prayer "to unnatural gods whose supplicants are dubbed 'courageous.'"¹² For Yanitelli, political freedom was a guise for political subversion. The novel was not read as a tract about democratic freedom from constraint but, as Richard Sullivan wrote in *The Chicago Tribune*, "ridiculous propaganda."¹³ In a crude process of demonisation, Vidal was denounced as un-American and associated with the corruption of the Old World and its totalitarian politics.

The contrast between the celebration of *Williwaw* and the denunciation of *The City and the Pillar* raised a question that proves fundamental to Vidal's work: to what extent do the media uphold the *idea* of America? In "pondering freedom," Jim Willard, the protagonist of *The City and the Pillar*, concludes that "[l]ife would certainly be happier for everyone in a world where sex was thought of as something

¹¹ Patricia Bennett, 'Intermediate Sex,' Hartford, Connecticut *Courant*, February 1, 1948.

¹² Victor R. Yanitelli, 'The City and the Pillar,' *Best Sellers*, March 15, 1948.

¹³ Richard Sullivan, 'Taboo's Cast Aside in Gore Vidal's Novel,' *Chicago Tribune*, January 25, 1948.

natural and not fearsome, and men could love men naturally, in the way they were meant to, as well as to love women naturally, in the way they were meant to.”¹⁴ The Declaration of Independence states that all men are created equal, and that to each is reserved the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Yet to Vidal, as he later wrote, that each man’s “idea of happiness is persecuting others does confuse matters a bit.”¹⁵ It is this same contradiction which defined the nature of his conflict with the established press. “[T]he taste which men have for liberty, and that which they have for equality,” Alexis de Tocqueville wrote in *Democracy in America*, “are, in fact, two different things.” It is not liberty which is characteristic of democratic ages, he argued, but, rather, a “passion” for equality. In times of social change such a passion “swells to the height of fury.”¹⁶ That Vidal was denounced as un-American at a time when the country had started to adapt to a new era of world leadership is concurrent with de Tocqueville’s reading of the democratic temperament. What Vidal learned from the reaction of the established press to *The City and the Pillar* was that it served to defend the idea of equality to the detriment of liberty. This conflict over how exceptionalism was to be realised within the confines of a democratic society would in fact determine his attitude toward the media and the empire it served to defend. He understood from it that the spirit of liberty did not determine what would prove newsworthy. It was on such a foundation moreover that Vidal believed the media would ensure the principle of exceptionalism consistently founded.

¹⁴ *The City and the Pillar*, 1948 (London, 1965), 185-186.

¹⁵ ‘Drugs,’ *United States*, 641. (NYT, September 26, 1970.) Herein *US*.

¹⁶ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* 1835 (1956), 190, 191.

As the Second World War had liberated Vidal from his prior constraints, the same proved true of the United States. The wartime economy had brought an end to the great Depression of the 1930s. Whereas war production registered two percent in 1939, by 1943 it had reached forty percent. This in turn fuelled industrial expansion, which exceeded fifteen percent per annum in the years from 1940 to 1944.¹⁷ As a result America emerged from the war as the predominant world power. Its economic and military strength dwarfed that of the shattered European countries.

For Vidal, the literature of the post-war era would honour the Pax Americana. "Those were the happy years when a new era in our letters was everywhere proclaimed," he recalled. "We would have, it was thought, a literature to celebrate the new American empire."¹⁸ The writer, he believed, would define the prospect for an era founded on the precepts of exceptionalism. He would, as Vidal indicated throughout *The City and the Pillar*, renounce a tribalism that gave rise to a culture based on "necessary lies" and a "never-ending masquerade."¹⁹ This would in turn confer a personal and political freedom on the individual. In terms of political rhetoric moreover, this was the objective of US foreign policy. As Harry Truman stated, the spirit of Thomas Jefferson should inform the "new concept of our world responsibility." No one nation, he continued, "has a monopoly on Jefferson's principles," so in order to lead the world America should therefore "recognise the right of other men and other nations to share" this ideological bounty.²⁰ As David Caute wrote in *The Great Fear*,

¹⁷ Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (London, 1989), 460-461.

¹⁸ 'Visit to a Small Planet,' *US*, 1160. (*Reporter*, June 11, 1957.)

¹⁹ *City and the Pillar*, 185.

²⁰ Harry S. Truman, *Years of Trial and Hope* (1956), 107-108. From Truman's address at the Jefferson Day Dinner, 5 April, 1947.

[b]y 1945 America's patriotic imperative had acquired a truly imperialistic and even messianic image of its own mission in the world. This kind of imperialism, particularly rooted in the liberal intelligentsia, is not necessarily economic, but rather cultural, idealistic, self-righteous, moral.²¹

This rhetoric of moral authority is the ideological hinge on which Vidal's understanding of an imperial golden age turned.

In retaliation against press criticism of his work Vidal therefore invoked this authority. In 1948 he started to lecture on the distinction between the writer and the critic. In its final form this lecture was published in 1953 as 'Ladders to Heaven: Novelists and Critics of the 1940s.'²² Vidal argued throughout that critics tend to be "absolutists," whereas the writer can wrench free from such limitations. The breakdown of "the old authority of the church, of settled Puritan morality," he maintained, created an opportunity for the writer "to create without wasting one's substance in political or social opposition." No longer would it be necessary, as it had throughout the Depression, to write in opposition to the capitalist state. Yet although, he conceded, this was not so simple in practice, that there "is as much to protest as ever before," the philosophy is one of exceptionalism. Throughout the essay Vidal is concerned with the writer's independence from the old strictures of authority. His vision of the new imperium is one in which "there is no reality for man except in his relations with his own kind."²³ The writer, unlike the critic, was therefore involved in the philosophical grounding of an era which promised freedom from tribal taboos, and was grounded in a moral authority he believed did not proscribe but, on the contrary, endeavoured to discard the prohibitions of the Old World.

²¹ David Caute, *The Great Fear* (London, 1978), 21-22.

²² Early drafts are held GVC, Box 33, Folder 3.

²³ 'Writers and Critics of the 1940s,' *US*, 15, 17. (*New World Writing* # 4, 1953.)

The hiatus between the end of the Second World War in 1945, and the beginning of the Korean War in 1950, William Manchester noted in his reading of the golden age, “was certainly a time of tremendous flux.” Nevertheless, he qualified, “[i]t was a lacuna, a breathing space for the children of the Depression who had come of age overseas.”²⁴ For Vidal this was a time to deliberate on the possibilities afforded by the new empire. “In 1948, the war three years behind us, the Korean war not yet upon us—the American empire quiescent, gorged with conquest,” he wrote in *Two Sisters*, “we lived as though it would be forever summer, and did not brood on our losses.” Politics, moreover, “were seldom mentioned. After all, Fascism had just been vanquished for all time while Communism was as remote as the Soviet Union, and about as appealing.”²⁵ It was during this era, as Godfrey Hodgson observed, that “in almost every department of intellectual life, the doctrine of ‘American exceptionalism’ revived.”²⁶ Yet Vidal reflected an American hubris rather than an American exceptionalism. In fact he described the political views he held throughout this time as a product of his class. “I was very much on the Right,” he said, with “class responses, which, as a kid, I was not about to start analyzing.”²⁷ His “responses” reflected an arrogance particular to the class into which he was born: he not only wanted but *expected* to be listened to. The failure of the golden age that ensued made him question the foundation of his idealistic political beliefs.

The condemnation of *The City and the Pillar* in the established press was the first indication of the terms on which the golden age would founder. Throughout his career Vidal has defended the publication of the novel as “an act of considerable moral courage.”²⁸ “With an axe,” he recalled in 1975, “I took on the heterosexual

²⁴ William Manchester, *The Glory and the Dream* (London, 1975), 418.

²⁵ *Two Sisters* (London, 1970), 11, 38.

²⁶ Godfrey Hodgson, *America In Our Time* (1976), 95.

²⁷ Jon Wiener, ‘The Scholar Squirrels and the National Security State: An Interview with Gore Vidal,’ *Radical History Review* 44 (1989), 114.

²⁸ *VFW*, 87. (1974)

dictatorship of the country.”²⁹ Yet *The City and the Pillar* is far more of a plea for equality than an axe. In January 1948 the twenty-two year old Vidal was not the dissident he was to become. Nevertheless, although he had, as Fred Kaplan noted, “cast himself as a mainstream novelist writing about issues the American literary world at large could accept for a general readership,” he also had the reputation of an “*enfant terrible*” to sustain.³⁰ To his literary amour, Anaïs Nin, he wrote “we’ll both be outcasts when it comes out. The deep-rutted critics will be as frightened of me as of you.”³¹ More fundamentally, he understood from his grandfather that to honour principles first was integral to the American idea. “I always found him noblest,” Vidal later wrote of T.P. Gore, “when he put his career at risk for some overriding principle.”³² The publication of *The City and the Pillar* certainly made him an outcast, yet rather than being “frightened” the critics threatened his career. The diary he started to write at the beginning of 1948, in which he set out to record his literary success, was more a “grinding of his teeth in response to *City*’s stormy reviews,” Fred Kaplan wrote, and had “less to do with triumph than with anguish.”³³ The significance of this is that the conservatism of the mainstream press threatened not only his standing as a writer, but his idea of America itself, and his vision of a golden age.

At the start of his career, Vidal’s idea of the writer and his idea of American society were somewhat theoretical and romantic. The conflict with the social and political hierarchy engendered by *The City and the Pillar* wakened him from this dream. Although Vidal has never lost his idealism, it is evident that from this point

²⁹ Ibid., 89. (1975)

³⁰ Kaplan, *Vidal*, 226, 256.

³¹ Gore Vidal to Anaïs Nin, 11/1946, GVC, M97-206, Box 2, Folder 17.

³² *Palimpsest*, 57.

³³ Kaplan, *Vidal*, 261. In 1991 Vidal lifted all restrictions on access to material held in the archive (barring those on financial records less than ten years old) except for the diary, which is restricted until twenty years after his death. He also withheld it from Kaplan, who summarises only Vidal’s recollection of the diary.

on his experience proved to be one of disillusionment. The rise of Senator Joe McCarthy in 1950 only confirmed this. "After *The City and the Pillar*," Vidal recalled, "the next radicalizing thing was Joe McCarthy."³⁴ McCarthy reinforced the bogus link between homosexuality and Communism. He endorsed the removal of "sexual perverts from sensitive positions in our Government" on the ground that they were a security risk. He also warned that the Roman Empire fell when the ruling class became "morally perverted and degenerate."³⁵ For Vidal this was an object lesson in how the United States functioned. What he came to realise as the Cold War progressed was that the empire was founded not under the banner of American exceptionalism but the dollar. In a 1963 essay concerning the Soviet-American conflict in Egypt, he concluded "[w]e live not under the Pax Americana but the Pax Frigida." He described the Cold War not as a product of ideological conflict, but as a question of making money. "We are simply materialists," he argued, and "not bent on setting fire to the earth as a matter of holy principle." The meaning of the Cold War, he concluded, was not that of the "Red or Dead absolutes" voiced in the press and on television, but an issue of who could make what money where. "Today's empires are held not with the sword but the dollar."³⁶ The correlative was that the official rhetoric of state proved a smokescreen. The representation of the Cold War in the mass media was a subterfuge. It was the effect of this deception on the idea of America the media claimed to advocate that Vidal's work would denounce.

THE GOLDEN AGE IN RETROSPECT

Throughout his numerous essays on the nature of the empire, Vidal has demonstrated that the golden age was from the start undermined by the practices of the political

³⁴ Wiener, 'The Scholar Squirrels and the National Security State,' 117.

³⁵ Cited in Edwin R. Bayley, *Joe McCarthy and the Press* 1981 (1982), 161-162.

³⁶ 'Nasser's Egypt,' *US*, 1230-1231. (*Esquire*, October 1963.)

establishment. In 'How We Missed the Saturday Dance' (1993) he wrote that "while the Golden Age had its moment in the sun up on deck, down in the engine room the management was inventing the 'Defense' Department and the National Security Council with its secret, unconstitutional decrees."³⁷ There were, as a result, "two stories" of the post-war era: the golden age and "the demons at work beneath the floor."³⁸ The extent to which this subterfuge was revealed throughout the Cold War enforced the direction of his work. The extent to which it had been safeguarded through the most powerful of the media outlets in turn defined that work. His anger at an establishment that destroyed the promise the golden age by exploiting the rhetoric which should have promoted it gave rise to his dissident polemic.

In 'The Last Empire' (1997) Vidal conceded that the golden age proved representative of the rhetorical fun-house created from this division of American history into fiction and fact. "We enjoy halls of mirrors, where everyone is comically distorted" he wrote of the country to which the veterans returned.³⁹ Vidal takes his stand as a representative of the old republic opposed to the "seedy and corrupt" empire.⁴⁰ His description of the post-war era as a fun-house is a metaphor which demonstrates how it was an era predicated on the reversal of meaning. His commitment to exceptionalism in *The City and the Pillar* was in the fun-house mirror of the press reflected as an attack on American values. In looking back he blamed an establishment committed not to the political dream of an exceptionalist state, but to the dream of success and of money. Consistent throughout his work therefore is the endeavour to demythologise the precepts of American foreign policy instituted at the time of the golden age.

³⁷ 'How We Missed the Saturday Dance,' *Virgin Islands* (London, 1997), 175. (*Newsweek*, January 11, 1993.)

³⁸ Wiener, 'Scholar Squirrels,' 133.

³⁹ 'The Last Empire,' *Vanity Fair*, November 1997, 174, 167.

⁴⁰ 'Preface,' *Armageddon?* (London, 1987), viii.

It has long been Vidal's contention that the rhetoric disseminated through the outlets of government and the mass media undermined the idea of America as an exception to the hierarchic class system of Europe. He argued that under the banner of the Cold War the constitutional government was replaced with a national security state answerable only to the corporate interests that comprised it. Fifty years after the inauguration of the Cold War at the hands of the Truman Doctrine (March 12, 1947) Vidal wrote that a predatory empire had been wrought under the guise of the old republic. To counter the political crisis that destabilised the former British protectorate Greece, and to prevent the likelihood of a communist government, Truman declared that it was US policy to "support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities and outside pressures."⁴¹ He used the language of exceptionalism to warrant the extension of American influence and in so doing disguised the imperialist intent of such a policy. The "old republic," Vidal explained, was then replaced "with the newborn National Security State," and the US "set up shop as the major *European* power west of the Elbe." US policy was therein decided by the "real government"—the National Security Council, the Pentagon, and the secret agencies—as opposed to the "cosmetic 'constitutional' government."⁴² Political rhetoric safeguarded the remunerative operations of an imperial corporate state through the fiction that intervention was dictated by its "overwhelming commitment to freedom, democracy and human rights."⁴³

The Truman Doctrine proved to be the blueprint for American foreign policy throughout the Cold War. In 1987 Theodore Draper described it as "the original codification of the Pax Americana illusion" and "the source of American hubris."⁴⁴ It established, as David Caute wrote in *The Great Fear*, "the double standards that have

⁴¹ Truman, *Years of Trial and Hope*, 106.

⁴² Note to 'Ollie,' *A View from the Diner's Club. Essays 1987-1991* (London, 1991), 183. (*Newsweek*, 13 July, 1987.)

⁴³ Truman, *Years of Trial and Hope*, 106.

⁴⁴ Theodore Draper, 'American Hubris,' *The Gulf War Reader* (1991), 41, 40.

obscured the motives of American foreign policy.”⁴⁵ In supporting Greece, the US condoned the repression Truman had opposed. Under US supervision the royalist Greek government conducted a reign of terror. The military delegation, the American Mission for Aid to Greece, sanctioned the execution of thousands of political prisoners and the use of concentration camps to imprison people who, in the words of the AMAG chief Dwight Griswold, “were found to have affiliations which cast grave doubts on their loyalty to the state.” When the British protested the imprisonment of fourteen thousand people in concentration camps, the American ambassador stated that the government “had to throw their net very wide to catch the right people.” He estimated the “right people” at about “a dozen key men.”⁴⁶ The Truman Doctrine ensured that all opposition to the government would benefit from neither Jefferson’s principles nor due process.

Such a practice was for Vidal characteristic of American foreign policy. In a 1989 essay he wrote that in almost every case of intervention

our overwhelming commitment to freedom, democracy and human rights has required us to support those régimes that would deny freedom, democracy and human rights to their own people. We justify our affection for fascist (or to be cosy, authoritarian) régimes because each and every one of them is a misty-eyed convert to our national religion, which is anti-communism.⁴⁷

Anti-communism proved to be the new authority under which a lucrative foreign policy could be justified. The double standard Caute identified is in Vidal’s reasoning no double standard at all. One position is the fun-house rhetoric to which no act of intervention conforms, while the other is representative of the actual policy. The history rendered suitable for public consumption, Vidal maintained, is nothing but a fiction which sustained the illusion of a republic.

⁴⁵ Caute, *Great Fear*, 30.

⁴⁶ Lawrence S. Wittner, ‘The Truman Doctrine and the Defense of Freedom,’ *Diplomatic History* 4, Spring 1980, 164, 167.

⁴⁷ ‘Cue the Green God, Ted,’ *US*, 1029. (*Nation*, 7-14 August, 1989.)

The establishment press proved instrumental to the maintenance of this illusion. In response to the Truman Doctrine, Vidal wrote, “[t]he media spoke with a single voice. Time Inc. publisher Henry Luce said it the loudest: ‘God has founded America as a global beacon of freedom.’”⁴⁸ As early as 1941 Luce was convinced that the US should “assume the leadership of the world,” and, as a result, “create the first great American Century.”⁴⁹ In the prosperity of the post-war era the establishment press advocated such a stand. *The New York Times* pronounced that “the epoch of isolation and occasional intervention is ended,” and “is being replaced by an era of American Responsibility.”⁵⁰ The celebrated Walter Lippmann went as far as to complain that the US really should have consulted the United Nations before Truman made his emphatic declaration. Yet although he was viewed as a critic of the Cold War (a phrase that he popularised in his column) Lippmann “advocated unilateral action” in Greece.⁵¹ Such endorsement was significant for, as the historian Melvyn P. Leffler wrote, Truman and his advisers were aware that “most Americans simply did not attribute great significance to the problems of foreign affairs,” and that in order “to reshape these attitudes” he would have to tailor the crisis for public consumption.⁵² The media representation of the Truman Doctrine conformed to the aims of the administration. It did not have to question its moral authority for it reflected the arrogance of American exceptionalism. It provided a rationale for intervention, and it determined the rhetoric that the government and the mass media would use to safeguard the lucrative imperial enterprise.

⁴⁸ ‘The Last Empire,’ 191.

⁴⁹ Henry Luce, ‘The American Century,’ *Life* (February 17, 1941), 61.

⁵⁰ Cited by Noam Chomsky, *Towards a New Cold War*, (London, 1982), 20. (No date given.)

⁵¹ Fred Halliday, *The Making of the Second Cold War*, (London, 1986) 3; Dean Acheson, *Present At The Creation* (London, 1969), 223.

⁵² Melvyn P. Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power*, (Stanford, 1992), 146.

This understanding of how the requirements of the corporate state are safeguarded by government and the media observes the Populist understanding that political conspiracy characterised the operations of advanced capitalism. The Populist ideologues of the late nineteenth century, Richard Hofstadter wrote in *The Age of Reform*, understood post-bellum history to be “a sustained conspiracy of international money power.”⁵³ Although such ideologues were somewhat irrational in their identification of Jewish financiers and the gold gamblers of Europe and America as the authors of such a conspiracy, the theory itself had a comprehensible foundation. The conspiracy they identified, as Lawrence Goodwyn demonstrated, was that of the industrial class against the idea of a democratic America:

If the political application of money to the legislative process fostered a permanent climate of privilege and corruption, its application to the nation’s press forestalled the possibility of achieving a democratic remedy for corruption. Thus, Populists asserted, the assumed terms of the social contract were being undone.⁵⁴

The key argument was that as capitalism advanced so the potential for democracy receded.

For Gore Vidal it was this element of the political heritage bestowed by his grandfather, Senator Thomas Pryor Gore, which explained how the corporate state undermined the idea of the democratic society. The media, he concluded in ‘Time for a People’s Convention’ (1992) is the conduit for political objectives “manufactured in the boardrooms by those corporations—once national, now international—that control our lives.” He continued that

Naturally this sounded to my audience like the old conspiracy. Later I was asked if I actually thought that Kay Graham and Larry Tisch really told the news departments of *The Washington Post* and CBS what to tell us. I said, Yes, of course, they do on occasion, but in everyday practice they don’t need to

⁵³ Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform from Bryan to F.D.R.* (London, 1962), 70.

⁵⁴ Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise* (1976), 354.

give instructions because everyone who works for them thinks exactly alike on those economic issues that truly matter.⁵⁵

The important point is that from the school to the media, the education system is founded on economic biases that favour the practices of international capitalism. This is the product of neither a master plan nor an organised conspiracy but of an evolution within American society. The Populist movement endeavoured to forestall such an evolution not because it opposed capitalism, but because it understood that advanced capitalism threatened to immerse the democratic rights of the individual under a sea of profit. This was achieved through the funding of political candidates and through metropolitan newspapers enriched by advertising revenues. For Vidal this was indicative of how the social and economic system of America functioned throughout the Cold War.

Vidal drew on the Populist idea of conspiracy in order to demonstrate how the media ensured no viable alternative to the corporate state could present itself. Such a conspiracy is the foundation for his work on the evolution of the national security state. The reason for the Cold War buried under the philanthropic rhetoric of the Truman Doctrine, Vidal observed, was that the United States was committed to the economic restoration of Europe in order to prevent another Depression. As Walter LaFeber noted, post-war objectives were shaped by the “Ghosts of Depression Past and Depression Future.”⁵⁶ Thus, Vidal argued, “to maintain a general prosperity (and enormous wealth for the few)” the magnates who had been enriched by the war “decided that we would become the world’s policeman.”⁵⁷ Although carried out in the name of democracy, this process was achieved through a far-reaching conspiracy, as demonstrated in a key source for ‘The Last Empire,’

⁵⁵ ‘Time for a People’s Convention,’ VI, 188-189. (*Nation*, January 27, 1992.)

⁵⁶ Walter LaFeber, *America, Russia, and the Cold War*, Eighth Edition (London, 1997), 9.

⁵⁷ ‘The Day the American Empire Ran Out of Gas,’ US, 1008. (*Nation*, January 11, 1986.)

Carolyn Eisenberg's *Drawing the Line: the American Decision to Divide Germany, 1944-1949* (1996). With reference to published and archival ^{-unpublished} documents, Eisenberg demonstrated the extent to which the post-war reconstruction of Europe was a product of primarily economic questions. She concluded that the violations of individual rights practised by the Russians, the justification for intervention voiced by the government and the press, "were not the facts that shaped U.S. decision making."⁵⁸ Using Eisenberg as a source, Vidal emphasised the extent to which the stated position of the United States was contrary to what it had in secret planned. This characterised the nature of the empire as he understood it and demonstrated that it was, from the start, predicated on the misrepresentation of fact.

There is, as Hofstadter wrote in *The Age of Reform*, "a great difference between locating conspiracies *in* history and saying that history *is*, in effect, a conspiracy."⁵⁹ The decision to divide Germany, and the Cold War it occasioned, were the result of a conspiracy *in* history. Although the questions that led to the eventual division were of great complexity, such a division was, as Eisenberg argued, somewhat inevitable because the United States was from the start committed to a definite plan for economic revival. This plan, formulated by the State Department, was concealed first from the president, Franklin D. Roosevelt, throughout the peace accords at Yalta in February 1945, and therein from the Soviet Union and the American people.⁶⁰ Although the division of Germany was "at odds with their public rhetoric," it was, Eisenberg noted, supported by the US delegation. To achieve this end without public resistance the State Department had already diffused any threat from the press. In 1946, using ^{Dwight D.} Eisenhower as its spokesman, the War Department "had arranged a series of lunches and German tours for the publishers and editors of

⁵⁸ Carolyn Eisenberg, *Drawing the Line: the American Decision to Divide Germany, 1944-1949* (Stanford, 1996), 11.

⁵⁹ Hofstadter, *Age of Reform*, 71-72.

⁶⁰ Eisenberg, *Drawing the Line*, 70, 120.

the major U.S. media. By establishing a line to their bosses, the intention was to curb the muckraking of the working reporters.”⁶¹ The delegation then aimed to manufacture a split so that it did not have to accommodate the Soviet demands agreed to at Yalta and reconfirmed six months later at Potsdam.

Consequently, in November 1947, Eisenberg wrote,

[t]he American delegation arrived in London, determined to have a split. The awkwardness of their position was that they were publicly committed to German unification. Together with the British, their operation goal was to conduct the meeting so that the Soviet would appear responsible for the results. Once the Allied negotiations had failed, they intended to proceed with the arrangements for a West German government.⁶²

The popular conception of the Soviet ^{Union} which had already been established in the press supported this representation. As described in Herbert Agar’s *The Unquiet Years* and Eric F. Goldman’s *The Crucial Decade*, the press represented the Yalta agreements as of far greater benefit to Stalin, and that in the end he, driven by imperial motives, reneged on such agreements. The press treated Stalin as an “imperial beast,” Agar wrote; and for Goldman, as for the nation, this made sense of Russian conduct within the United Nations, in which they were “incessantly vetoing, staging stormy walkouts, presenting their arguments in a shrieking billingsgate.”⁶³ Yet, as Vidal wrote,

[a]lthough the Soviets still wanted to live by our original agreements at Yalta and even Potsdam, we had decided, unilaterally, to restore the German economy to enfold a re-armed Germany into Western Europe, thus isolating the Soviet, a nation that had not recovered from the Second World War and had no nuclear weapons.⁶⁴

⁶¹ Ibid., 302, 267.

⁶² Ibid., 355.

⁶³ Herbert Agar, *The Unquiet Years* (London, 1957), 20; Eric F. Goldman, *The Crucial Decade—and After* (1960), 34-35.

⁶⁴ ‘The Last Empire,’ 174; Eisenberg, *Drawing the Line*, 223-224, 430.

Thus, as a result of this conspiracy, the Soviet Union was reflected in the fun-house mirror as “a monolithic, omnipotent empire with tentacles everywhere on earth, intent on our destruction.”⁶⁵ Yet to fully recreate the Soviet as a immediate threat to the American way of life would take more than government rhetoric and the machinations of the press. It would take the medium of television, the single most important factor in Vidal’s representation of how the media undermined the dream of an exceptionalist state.

TELEVISION AND THE COLD WAR

In his groundbreaking work *Understanding Media* (1964), Marshall McLuhan wrote that the primary medium in any society “shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action.”⁶⁶ Thus conceived, television is the key to an understanding of American society throughout the Cold War. In ‘The Last Empire,’ Vidal described it as necessary to sustain the fun-house. Although “the arts briefly flourished,” he wrote, “a novelty, television, had begun to appear in household after household, its cold distorting eye relentlessly projecting a fun-house view of the world.”⁶⁷ Writing in the 1950s, Vidal charged that television had brought an end to the promised golden age. “[A]ppalling education combined with clever toys,” he wrote, “has distracted that large public which found pleasure in prose fictions.”⁶⁸ In an address to a graduating class delivered in 1960 he argued that “in the last ten years we have lost the ability to criticise ourselves,” and cited television as the cause. As a medium controlled by advertisers, he stated, it could not afford to offend the audience. That “the open discussion of any real problem in a play or, more important,

⁶⁵ ‘The Day the American Empire Ran out of Gas,’ *US*, 1015.

⁶⁶ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media* (1964), 9.

⁶⁷ ‘The Last Empire,’ 167.

⁶⁸ ‘A Note on the Novel,’ *US*, 24. (*NYT Book Review*, August 5, 1956.)

in the news, is bound to offend somebody” nurtured a society founded on conformity.⁶⁹ Yet as he came to understand the Cold War as a political confidence trick, Vidal observed that television was the primary medium through which this trick was sustained.

In an important historical convergence, television emerged as a dominant cultural force at precisely the same time as the Cold War. According to the Nielsen ratings system, January 1946 was the first time more televisions than radios were operating during prime time hours.⁷⁰ Television was, from the start, used to promote a consciousness of war. In 1948, RCA chairman of the board David Sarnoff stated that the through its proper use, “America will rise to new heights as a nation of free people and high ideals.” In 1950 he called for it to become a bulwark against Communism. So envisioned, television would be propaganda for the American way of life. In the context of the emerging Cold War, J. Fred MacDonald concluded in his book *Television and Red Menace*, it “became the most important vehicle through which citizens learned the latest developments in a rivalry that, in simplified terms, matched good Democracy against evil Communism.”⁷¹ Thus from current affairs to the Westerns and spy serials the conflict between good and evil was given narrative form. Television changed the scale of human association by making a consciousness of the Cold War integral to everyday life.

In ‘Cue the Green God, Ted’ (1989) Vidal argued that because television is central to American culture, the power of the state to censor dissident opinion is increased. Although it is possible to eventually “work out what is actually going on” from the proliferate media outlets, for most people “network news is the only news

⁶⁹ ‘Address to graduating class,’ 17, 18, 19, GVC. Box 10, Folder 6.

⁷⁰ David Halberstam, *The Powers That Be* (1979), 146.

⁷¹ J. Fred MacDonald, *Television and the Red Menace* (1985), 16, 17-18, 18, 101. Sarnoff is quoted from the publication *Broadcasting*, July 10, 1950, and September 4, 1950.

even though it may not be news at all but only a series of flashing fictions intended, like the avowed commercials, to keep docile huddled masses, keep avid for products addled consumers.”⁷² It has long been Vidal’s view that the television commercial precluded the very idea of rebellion. “From babyhood to the grave the tube tells you of all the fine things you ought to own because other people (who are nicer looking and have better credit ratings than you) own them.”⁷³ In other words, the American dream of success and the ruling principle of money sustain the status quo. This is another fiction that defines the fun-house.

Another of our agreed-upon fantasies is that we do not have a class system in the United States. The Few who control the Many through Opinion have simply made themselves invisible. They have convinced us that we are a classless society in which anyone can make it. Ninety percent of the stories in the pop press are about winners of lotteries or poor boys and girls who, despite adenoidal complaints, become overnight millionaire singers. So there is still hope, the press tells the folks, for the 99 percent who will never achieve wealth no matter how hard they work.⁷⁴

Vidal believed that the power of television is to hypnotise the people with dreams of material wealth. This in turn fattens the pockets of the corporate entities that own the established media outlets. He understood this to be a threat to the idea of America because such concentrated ownership ensured no opinion other than corporate opinion is voiced.

“In my lifetime and country,” Vidal wrote in 1989, “I have watched our governors manipulate opinion with the greatest of ease.”⁷⁵ This is possible, he argued, because the “corporate ownership of the country has absolute control of the pulpit—‘the media’—as well as of the schoolroom.”⁷⁶ The corporate appropriation of the media is a trend that increased in the years after the Second World War. “By the mid sixties,” Godfrey Hodgson observed, “the United States had come closer

⁷² ‘Cue the Green God, Ted,’ *US*, 1031.

⁷³ ‘State of the Union: 1975,’ *US*, 933. (*Esquire*, May 1975.)

⁷⁴ ‘Monotheism and its Discontents,’ *US*, 1052. (*Nation*, July 13, 1992.)

⁷⁵ ‘Gods & Greens,’ *US*, 1041. *Observer*, August 27, 1989.

⁷⁶ ‘Cue the Green God, Ted,’ *US*, 1031.

than any time since the revolutionary period to accepting the lead of an opinion-forming elite.”⁷⁷ The concentrated economic and political elite, and the concentrated sources of information concerning the policies drawn up by this elite, meant that control was increasingly centralised. At the end of the Second World War for example, 80 percent of daily newspapers were independently owned. In 1989, 80 percent were owned by corporate chains.⁷⁸ And although the media are far from a “solid monolith,” as Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky argue in their exhaustive study *Manufacturing Consent*, any fundamental challenge to the machinery of state power is excluded. The reason for this, Herman and Chomsky conclude, is that the core difference between the conservative and the liberal media is “largely on the tactics appropriate for achieving common ends.”⁷⁹ This is an integral part of the inherent conspiracy Vidal outlined in ‘Time for a People’s Convention.’ An education system and a media machine that have evolved under the corporate state are disciplined so as not to challenge the fundamental objectives of that state. As a result, Vidal wrote, there is “always a semblance of ‘consensus’ ” for the foreign and domestic policy of the United States for there is “no opposition media” to offer an alternative.⁸⁰

“Political decadence occurs,” Vidal thus reasoned, “when the forms that a state pretends to observe are known to be empty of all meaning.”⁸¹

As societies grow decadent, the language grows decadent, too. Words are used to disguise, not to illuminate, action: You liberate a city by destroying it. Words are used to confuse, so that at election time people will solemnly vote against their interests. Finally, words must be so twisted as to justify an empire that has now ceased to exist, much less make sense.⁸²

⁷⁷ Hodgson, *America in Our Time*, 139.

⁷⁸ Ben Bagdikian, *The Media Monopoly*, Third Edition (1990), 4. The second edition provided source material for the essay ‘Cue the Green God, Ted.’

⁷⁹ Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent*, 1988 (London, 1994) 332, note 3. The first edition provided source material for the essay ‘Cue the Green God, Ted.’

⁸⁰ ‘Cue the Green God, Ted,’ *US*, 1030, 1031.

⁸¹ ‘Time for a People’s Convention,’ *VI*, 189.

⁸² ‘The Day the American Empire Ran Out of Gas,’ *US*, 1014-1015. (*Nation*, January 11, 1986.)

Vidal concluded that the manipulation of political rhetoric throughout the Cold War, and the use of the media as an ideological weapon, resulted in a society in which the historical precedents of such rhetoric had been undermined. In a 1993 introduction to his American historical novels, published as *Narratives of a Golden Age*, he wrote “[n]o, it was not all that golden for any of us at the time but we kept thinking it might be until, thanks to Vietnam, we came to realize that, like everyone else, we are simply at sea in history and that somehow our republic had got mislaid upon the way.”⁸³ Vidal believed that the golden age heralded an era of peace, of a *Pax Americana*. “We had created the empire by ‘45,” he recalled in 1984. “It was from ‘45 to ‘50 that it looked like we might be creating a civilization.”⁸⁴ Vidal had faith that such an empire would not proscribe but would endeavour to discard the prohibitions of the Old World. Nevertheless, he was taught by his grandfather to believe that American exceptionalism could only be sustained through a limited federal government, not the extensive bureaucracy in place at the end of the Second World War. As a result Vidal would throughout his career wrestle with the tension between his idealisation of the golden age and the dissident politics informed by the teachings of his grandfather.

⁸³ ‘Introduction,’ *Narratives of a Golden Age*, Burr (London, 1994), ix-x.

⁸⁴ Interview, Curt Supplee, ‘Gore Vidal, Acerbic Apostate,’ *International Herald Tribune*, July 27, 1984.

Significant Childhood Influences

The foundation for the ideological conflict from which Vidal would emerge as a writer of historical importance was determined during his formative years. There are three significant influences that recur throughout his writing which demonstrate the source of this conflict. The first and most comprehensive is that of his grandfather, Senator Thomas Pryor Gore, from whom he derived an understanding of what America was originally contrived to be. The second is Hollywood, which, on a subliminal level, taught Vidal an understanding of how political power should be exercised that countered the teachings of T.P. Gore. The third, L. Frank Baum's Oz books, provided a bridge between the preceding two. Baum endorsed the idea of the strong central ruler characteristic of Hollywood cinema, while Oz to a certain mirrored Jeffersonian idealism because the values of pastoral society were predominant. These ideas informed Vidal's vision of the Pax Americana, and, in the end, his understanding of a media machine used to conceal the economic reasons for empire under a mantle of idealistic rhetoric.

THOMAS PRYOR GORE

Gore Vidal was educated within two political traditions. The first determined his experience of how America was ruled, and the second defined the prospect for the exceptional society. His schooling reflected the ideology of the ruling class North. Philips Exeter Academy, which Vidal attended from 1940 to 1943, was

representative of such values. It was, as Fred Kaplan observed, a school which “embodied an ideology of privilege that made equals of all those who had been chosen.”¹ It was this privilege that prevented Vidal being sent to the front in 1943. Yet outside of the hierarchic social system of the North it was the political rhetoric of the South, learned through the teachings of his grandfather, that provided the axis on which Vidal’s career would turn.

A month after his birth in October 1925, Vidal’s family moved to the house of his maternal grandparents in Washington D.C. When Vidal was five years old his grandfather, Thomas Pryor Gore, was returned to the Senate in which he had served from 1908 to 1920. Gore was blind, and Vidal was enlisted at an early age to read for him. “I was prematurely taught to read by my grandmother so that she would be able to do other things than read to him,” he recalled.² Aside from such political material as the *Congressional Record* he would read “history, poetry, economics.”³ As a result, Vidal said, “history and politics were the air I breathed, the way my brain worked.”⁴ The form and direction of Vidal’s writing is a testament to the influence of T.P. Gore. It informed his idea of America as an exception to the hierarchic social and political organisation of the Old World. It invoked a political golden age that existed before the domination of the great corporations. It was likewise the foundation for his understanding of how the media was used as a political tool.

T.P. Gore was born in Mississippi on December 10, 1870, five years before the end of Reconstruction. In the elections of 1875, following “a decade of Republican and Negro rule,” the Democratic Party secured the important state offices.⁵ Gore’s father,

¹ Fred Kaplan, ‘Introduction,’ *The Essential Gore Vidal* (1999), xii.

² ‘Gore Vidal’s Gore Vidal,’ screened BBC1, 14 October 1995.

³ *Palimpsest*, 48.

⁴ ‘Gore Vidal’s Gore Vidal.’

⁵ Monroe Lee Billington, *Thomas P. Gore* (Lawrence, Kansas, 1967), 1.

who was both a farmer and a lawyer, was elected chancery clerk of Sumner (soon to be Webster) County. Throughout his formative years, Gore demonstrated a far greater interest in politics than the farm. At the age of ten he served an apprenticeship as a printer's devil at the state capital, Walthall, where he "absorbed political talk."⁶ In 1882 he worked as a page in the Mississippi senate, further consolidating his political knowledge. It was during this year that the experience which would define his career occurred: he was blinded in the right eye while attempting to dislodge an arrow trapped in the barrel of his toy crossbow. Three years earlier his left had been damaged, and by the time he was twenty Gore was completely blind. His struggle to overcome this obstacle proved inseparable from the philosophy engendered by the social and political changes that ran parallel to it. The importance of individualism, and an opposition to the forces that would restrain it, are the principles on which Gore founded his political career.

It was the philosophy of individualism which enabled Gore to overcome the potential impediment of his blindness. When he was eleven, his father gave him a book entitled *Lives of Self-Made Men*, which included a biography of the advocate of "internal improvements," Henry Clay. This book, he recalled, made a lasting impression.⁷ In 1887 he learned New York point print, and used it to read and re-read the Constitution and Declaration of Independence.⁸ It was the idea of independence these works described that proved of utmost importance to Gore. He refused to be sent to a school for the blind and worked hard to establish himself as a formidable political debater in Walthall Normal School. He then spoke across Webster County at political picnics organised by the new political movement, the Farmer's Alliance. In 1891 ^{members of} the People's Party, ~~which~~ had by this time been absorbed the Alliance, were so

⁶ Ibid., 2.

⁷ Ralph Arden Wasson, *A Study of the Speaking Career and Speeches of Thomas Pryor Gore*, M.A. thesis, University of Oklahoma, 1941, 9.

⁸ T.P. Gore, 'As It Happened,' 16, GVC, Box 133, Folder 1.

impressed by his skills they wanted to run him for office, yet he was not the required age of twenty-one at the time of election. In 1892 he graduated with a law degree from Cumberland University, ^{Lebanon,} Tennessee, and was nominated as the presidential elector in the fourth Mississippi district representing the People's Party. It was in the political philosophy of Populism, the ideological foundation of the People's Party, that Gore found his own struggle reflected.

Populism was a radical agrarian movement founded on the primary importance of internal improvements and economic individualism. Frederick Jackson Turner wrote that it was characteristic of the social development that "has been continually beginning over again on the frontier."⁹ Richard Hofstadter described the People's Party as the "heightened expression" of "a kind of popular impulse that is endemic in American political culture." This impulse was grounded in the Jeffersonian golden age of a society of honest yeomen, "in rural sentiments and on rural metaphors."¹⁰ The People's Party had been established in Webster County when the Democrats supported further restricted suffrage, and increased tax breaks for corporations at the 1890 state constitutional convention. Its platform advocated "equal rights to all and special privileges for none, public control of communications and transportation, and election of United States senators by direct vote of the people."¹¹ The years of Reconstruction and Redemption which followed the Civil War taught that the representatives of the North, as C. Vann Woodward wrote, "definitely allied themselves with the business interests."¹² This was to the detriment of the Southern farmer. The interdependence of the press, the political machine, and the forces of Northern industrialism were perceived as a threat to the

⁹ Frederick Jackson Turner, 'The Significance of the Frontier in American History,' *The Frontier in American History* 1920 (1962), 2, ref. 32.

¹⁰ Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform from Bryan to F.D.R.* (London, 1962), 4, 7.

¹¹ Cited, Fred Kaplan, *Gore Vidal* (London, 1999), 8.

¹² C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South* (Baton Rouge, 1951), 19.

independence of the Southerner, and the People's Party was formed to counter that threat.

To the Populists, the Northern banks were the enemy. The Omaha platform, issued in July 1892, stated that Populism sought to "restore the government of the Republic to the hands of 'the plain people,' with whose class it originated."¹³ For two decades after the end of Reconstruction, Mississippi alone, as C. Vann Woodward observed, was ruled by two conservative Democrat railroad lawyers.¹⁴ The Omaha platform was the ideological foundation for the People's Party, which would challenge this predilection.¹⁵ The Party, Henry Demarest Lloyd wrote in 1894, therefore represented "the mightiest hope that has ever stirred in the hearts of the masses—the hope of realizing and incarnating in the lives of the common people the fullness of the divinity of humanity."¹⁶ Under the terms of the Omaha platform, the federal government would be the conduit of liberty. In the name of the people it would exercise control over the distribution of a national currency "without the use of banking corporations," and likewise control transport, the telegraph, the telephone, and free land.¹⁷ Although it advocated increased federal control, its philosophy was the Southern agrarianism of Thomas Jefferson as opposed to the Northern industrialism of his rival, Alexander Hamilton.

The fundamental importance of the agrarian revolt was that it represented, as Lawrence Goodwyn wrote, "a new culture" which "attempted to shelter its participants from sundry indoctrinations emanating from the larger culture that was

¹³ 'The Omaha Platform,' reprinted in *Builders of American Institutions*, eds. Frank Friedel and Norman Pollack (Chicago, 1963), 352.

¹⁴ Woodward, *Origins*, 18.

¹⁵ Lawrence Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise* (1976), 310-311.

¹⁶ Henry Demarest Lloyd, 'The Divinity of Humanity' (4 November, 1894), reprinted *Builders of American Institutions*, 351.

¹⁷ 'The Omaha Platform,' 353.

industrial America itself.”¹⁸ In order to establish the credentials of a radical third party the Farmer’s Alliance had in 1890 organised around one thousand of its journals into the National Reform Press Association. In addition, by 1891 the Alliance had deployed around 35,000 official lecturers. “Dismissing ‘history as taught in schools’ as ‘practically valueless,’ ” C. Vann Woodward noted, “they undertook to write it over—formidable columns of it, from the Greeks up.”¹⁹ The idea of revisionist history was essential to a third party in an age when the press, as Goodwyn wrote, “was in step with the hard-money doctrines of both major parties.” Through the journals of the National Reform Press Association, and through the extensive lecturing system, the Populists debated how to achieve a truly democratic society in an age governed by capitalist practices. Its historical revisionism was moreover an attempt to warn the American people of the association between the business interests, the media, and the government “lest they be seduced into accepting rule by a two-party capitalist elite and calling it democracy.”²⁰ This revisionism, which would be of crucial importance to Gore Vidal’s political evolution, informed T.P. Gore’s understanding of how the principle of individualism safeguarded democracy in an era of advanced capitalism.

T.P. Gore founded his career on the principle of a self-sufficient individualism unrestrained by either the federal government or the corporate machine. He was informed not by the language of Hamilton, the language of the city, but that of the frontier which Ralph Waldo Emerson described as “the appointed remedy for whatever is fantastic or false in our country.”²¹ It was the frontier moreover that enabled Gore to pursue a political career. Although he was defeated in the election of 1892 his services were still in demand. In 1894 he rallied the Populist

¹⁸ Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise*, xi.

¹⁹ Woodward, *Origins*, 195. Citations from *National Economist*, IV (1890), 85.

²⁰ Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise*, 374, 354.

²¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, ‘The Young American’ (1844), *Complete Prose Works* (London, no date given), 397.

cause in Navarro County, Texas, where he moved that December to establish a law office. When this venture failed he returned in 1895 to run as the Populist state representative for Webster County. However, in spite of Gore's popularity and his considerable oratorical abilities, the Populist movement itself did not have enough support throughout the state for him to win the election. In 1900 he moved to Oklahoma Territory, where in 1902 he was elected to the council. Through his efforts to secure public ownership of waterworks and to control the abuses of the railroad owners Gore kept himself in the public eye. In 1907, a year after Oklahoma had been granted statehood, he was elected as one of the first two Senators to represent the new state.

Gore was elected as a Democrat, the party he had joined in 1899, a year after again failing to win election as a Populist candidate. Monroe Lee Billington concluded that Gore had not the same philosophical reasons as his family for allying with the cause of Populism, and that he was opportunist enough to recognise the decline of the movement.²² Vidal's observation that he was "more whig than populist," an advocate of Clay's "internal improvements" rather than a spokesman for farming interests, seems more accurate.²³ Whatever the conclusion, Gore's years of apprenticeship defined his political credentials. That he did not allow his blindness to interfere with his political ambitions confirmed the principles for which he stood and the idea of America such principles advanced. This, moreover, would prove significant to the stand Vidal would take as a political writer and activist. In his time in the Senate, T.P. Gore approached the larger platform of national politics from the standpoint of a Populist. As a result, his work as a Democrat was more than that of an agrarian reformer. Gore applied the Populist understanding of the social

²² Billington, *Gore*, 9.

²³ *Palimpsest*, 56.

and political system at the end of the nineteenth century to the issues of the twentieth. He therefore ensured that this heritage was part of the national debate.

Throughout his career Vidal would wrestle with the ideas of his grandfather, but what he would in due time return to was not the reactionary he knew, but the more radical Gore of his youth. As Gore had moved politically from *Left* to *Right*, so his grandson would return from *Right* to *Left*. From his work in the 1970s onward, Vidal would increasingly assume the radical Populism that T.P. Gore had advanced as a young man. Vidal's use of this heritage is crucial to his work for in an era governed by the values of the corporate state he returned to a tradition of revolt that countered the indoctrinations of industrial America. In 1959, C. Vann Woodward concluded in his essay 'The Intellectual and the Populist Heritage' that for the tradition of revolt to endure the intellectual "will learn all he can from the new criticism about the irrational and illiberal side of Populism . . . but he cannot afford to repudiate that heritage."²⁴ Vidal increasingly interpreted the practices of the American nation state under the Cold War from the standpoint of his Populist heritage. He did not repeat the irrational obsession with conspiracy theory, but, rather, an understanding of how conspiracies operated within the larger system. He did not describe the financial monarchs of the country as a "monopoly of 'Shylocks'"²⁵ but wrote of the "WASP ascendancy" who "own the country."²⁶ Furthermore, what Vidal learned from his grandfather's career was to remain answerable only to the idea of the exceptional society. T.P. Gore's success taught him that the social and political impediments outwith that idea could be, in due time, overcome.

²⁴ C. Vann Woodward, 'The Populist Heritage and the Intellectual,' *The Burden of Southern History* (Baton Rouge, 1960), 166. First published in 1959.

²⁵ Hofstadter, *Age of Reform*, 75.

²⁶ 'Reflections on Glory Reflected,' *US*, 168-1269. (*Threepenny Review*, Spring 1991.)

It was in the second phase of his career that the principles on which T.P. Gore had achieved success were tested. As a working politician, Gore represented the tradition of reform. The Populist movement, as Richard Hofstadter wrote, had “released the flow of protest and criticism that swept through American political affairs from the 1890s to the beginning of the first World War.” In 1908, when Gore took his seat, the agrarian Populist movement had given way to Progressivism, which was far less radical, cross-party, “urban, middle-class, and nationwide.” It aimed, Hofstadter wrote,

to restore a type of economic individualism and political democracy that was widely believed to have existed earlier in America and to have been destroyed by the great corporation and the corrupt political machine.²⁷

More often than not Gore voted with the Progressives. His anti-protectionist politics, and his belief that “farmers had been the victim of special privilege and protective duties in the past,” made him sympathetic to their cause.²⁸ Nevertheless, between the election of Woodrow Wilson in 1912, and the American entry into the First World War in 1916, Gore was forced into the minority. The war brought an end to the era of reform but Gore continued in steadfast opposition to any threat to internal improvements. His conflict with the political and economic machinery of the country bore a legacy crucial to the education of his grandson for it determined how the media was used as a political tool throughout a war that was to profit the great corporations.

For the election of 1912, after William Jennings Bryan announced that he would not seek the Democratic nomination for president, Gore supported the New Jersey governor Woodrow Wilson. In the words of Wilson biographer Arthur S. Link, Gore, “a political gameplayer of the first order,” had sensed “the mounting

²⁷ Hofstadter, *Age of Reform*, 60, 131, 5.

²⁸ Billington, *Gore*, 36.

wave of Wilson sentiment,” and announced in May 1911 that he had “ ‘concluded to support Mr. Wilson for the nomination.’ ”²⁹ Whether this was an opportunistic move or not, Gore stated that Wilson, like Bryan before him, was “in harmony with the spirit of enlightened and rational progress.”³⁰ In other words, he appealed to his whig sensibility. At any rate, Wilson had strong support among the Southern progressives who felt that he was the closest they would get to a Southern president.³¹ Wilson therefore continued to court Southern support when he was president. Two weeks after he took office he appointed Gore to the United States Rural Credit Commission, which was to study agricultural systems and conditions in Europe. Although Gore was unable to take up this post due to his administrative duties, he studied the report, and used this knowledge in his work on the Federal Farm Loan Act, the aim of which was to strengthen the system of rural credit.³² Yet by the election year 1916 Wilson had moved away from the Southern progressives and Gore came into conflict with him over the question of war in Europe.

Wilson had from the start of the war in 1914 defended the rights of Americans to travel on the ships of belligerent nations. In May 1915, when the British liner the *Lusitania* was, according to official report, sunk without warning, 128 Americans were among those killed. On January 5, 1916, after a series of conferences with Bryan, who had resigned as Secretary of State over the issue, Gore introduced two bills that would prevent such travel. When the Senate refused to take action Gore introduced a resolution to prevent the issue of passports for use on the ships of a belligerent nation, and the transport of both American citizens and contraband on American and neutral ships “at one and the same time.” An identical resolution was introduced by Representative Jeff McLemore of Texas in the House.³³

²⁹ Arthur S. Link, *Wilson: The Road to the White House* (Princeton, 1947), 327.

³⁰ Billington, *Gore*, 44.

³¹ Woodward, *Origins*, 470-476.

³² Billington, *Gore*, 61-64.

³³ Lawrence W. Levine, *Defender of the Faith* (1965), 42.

In his March 2 speech 'Travel on Armed Merchant Ships,' Gore stated that such a right "should not be made a toy and a plaything in the hands of any madcap American citizen." To exercise that right would be to commit an act of treason for it could force America to enter the war. What is more, as he argued in his July speech 'The True Basis for America's World Influence,' to travel on a belligerent ship was outwith the rights of the individual because it threatened the greater rights of a nation which advocated neutrality. Wilson opposed the Gore-McLemore resolutions on the grounds that the "out-and-out pacifists" preached "the doctrine of peace at any price and in any circumstances."³⁴ The establishment press went further and charged that the resolutions were the product of a conspiracy headed by the German ambassador and supported by Bryan. The resolutions, which the Speaker Champ Clark had predicted would pass the House by a majority ^{of} two to one, were defeated.³⁵

For the Populists, history was a conspiracy determined by the interests of the industrial class, and for the Progressives it was understood that war only served such interests. As Vidal wrote in his memoir, *Palimpsest*, "for Gore and the other populists, the imperialism of the two Roosevelts and Woodrow Wilson . . . was a terrible distraction from our destiny, which was the perfection of our own unusual if not, in the end, particularly 'exceptional' society."³⁶ What is interesting in the case of the *Lusitania* is that there *was* a conspiracy at work, the full extent of which was not made public until the 1972 publication of Colin Simpson's *Lusitania*. From October 1914 the United States had started to supply the Allies with war materials. The banking house J.P. Morgan and Co. had determined that, unlike the Wilson administration, they would not remain neutral and would secure the necessary contraband. The war in Europe had moreover introduced the threat of an economic

³⁴ Cited in Ernest May, *The World War and American Isolation* (Cambridge, 1959), 183-184.

³⁵ Levine, *Defender of the Faith*, 42-44.

³⁶ *Palimpsest*, 60.

recession. The house of Morgan and the National City Bank used this threat in order to persuade Wilson that he should sanction both loans to Allies and the shipping of contraband on passenger ships. Bryan had rejected the loans as “inconsistent with the true spirit of American neutrality.”³⁷ The two banks then turned to his ambitious under-secretary Robert Lansing to establish a direct line to Wilson and achieve their objectives.

When the Germans sank the *Lusitania*, “practically all her cargo,” Lansing informed Wilson, “was contraband of some kind.” The incident was nevertheless represented as a wanton attack on an unarmed vessel. Wilson then sealed the original manifest which contained the details of the cargo and marked it “Only to be opened by the President of the United States.”³⁸ The resignation of Bryan and the defeat of the Gore-McLemore resolutions were in other words the product of a conspiracy which made US entry into the war inescapable. Yet as Secretary of State, Bryan was aware that the *Lusitania* carried contraband.³⁹ Whether he informed T.P. Gore at their January 1916 meetings is undocumented. It is therefore important to note that the second bill introduced by Gore would prevent the transport of both American citizens *and* contraband on American and neutral ships “at one and the same time.” Furthermore, as far as Vidal is concerned, it is interesting that Gore turned against Wilson as the result of a conspiracy which brought an end to the Populist-Progressive era of reform. As Vidal has Wilson comment in *Hollywood* (1989), “How ironic it is! . . . After all the work we’ve done to control big business, guess what will happen now? They will be more in the saddle than ever before.”⁴⁰ Entry into the war validated the old Populist understanding of conspiracy. Furthermore, in

³⁷ Cited in Colin Simpson, *Lusitania*, 1972 (London, 1974), 55.

³⁸ Citations *ibid.*, 172, 254.

³⁹ Levine, *Defender of the Faith*, 11-12.

⁴⁰ *Hollywood*, 1989 (London, 1994), 42.

the 1970s, the business of the *Lusitania* confirmed for Vidal his grandfather's interpretation of Wilson's role in the American entry into the war.

Gore had been elected on an anti-war platform, and had supported Wilson in the 1916 election on the grounds that the "blessings of peace" were "due to President Wilson's wise leadership."⁴¹ After the US entered the war on April 6, 1917, Gore stood in opposition to the *conduct* of the war.⁴² He spoke against conscription on the grounds that it would "risk substituting military despotism for democracy in America." He believed that it took away "the opportunity to earn the glory of an American volunteer." Billington observed that

[i]n his opposition to the draft, Gore thought he was appealing to the patriotism of his constituency. But the propaganda for a conscripted army advanced by the War Department was quite effective . . . Indeed, so acceptable was the administration's selective service law that Gore's appeal to patriotism came to be interpreted as unpatriotic on his part.⁴³

While Gore argued for the principles on which the country was founded, the press, led by the *Daily Oklahoman*, started a war against him. It gave to the front page the suggestion of Mike Donnelly, the commissioner of accounting and finance in Oklahoma, that "because Gore is opposing Wilson's war policies, every man, woman and child . . . should sign a petition calling on him to resign." Gore claimed that ninety percent of his mail was supportive, and that opposition had been generated by the Oklahoma press, which he dubbed "the subsidized mistress of plutocracy." It was this plutocracy moreover that Gore viewed as the sole beneficiary of war. While the Wilson administration advocated borrowing the money to finance the war, Gore advocated higher taxation. "[H]e was repelled," Billington wrote, "at the idea of

⁴¹ Billington, *Gore*, 80.

⁴² Gore was not one of the six who voted against the declaration of war on April 2, 1917 because he was not present due to a circulatory infection. He had been ill from December 1916. Billington, *Gore*, 82.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 85.

companies such as Bethlehem Steel, Du Pont, and United States Steel making huge profits and then lending money to the government at interest.”⁴⁴

Gore ultimately understood the press to be in league with the financial interests served by the war. This stand led to his defeat in the 1920 Democratic primary, when, once again, the *Daily Oklahoman* led the attack. It dubbed him “a rubber stamp of the Kaiser,” and suggested that the Kaiser would have voted the same way. The party bosses had likewise decided that Gore should not again stand for election. They therefore found a candidate, Congressman Scott Ferris, who would appeal to all factions and therefore not split the anti-Gore vote. As a result of the relentless campaign against him, Gore was defeated in the primary by 106,454 votes to 80,243. Nevertheless, Ferris was defeated in the 1920 election. Oklahoma went Republican and endorsed the isolationist stand of Warren G. Harding. Gore moreover felt that he had been defeated not by the people but by a propaganda campaign orchestrated by the industrial class. For the rest of the decade he practised as a lawyer in Washington, D.C., and swore that he would return to the Senate after the effects of such propaganda had dissipated.⁴⁵

Gore taught his grandson that in this stand against the war effort he was true to the rule of principle. “I always found him noblest,” Vidal accordingly wrote, “when he put his career at risk for some overriding principle.”⁴⁶ In a letter to Vidal dated May 4, 1940, Gore described his resolution that Americans not travel on the ships of a belligerent power as “the first link in a chain that led to my downfall.” He added, “I did not doubt at the time that sooner or later public opinion would change and that sooner or later I would be vindicated—as I was when elected in 1930.”⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Ibid., 87, 86, 92.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 120-125, 146.

⁴⁶ *Palimpsest*, 57.

⁴⁷ T.P. Gore to Gene Vidal, May 4, 1940. GVC, Box 133, Folder 4.

The isolationist mood that prevailed in the aftermath of the stock market crash in 1929 certainly helped Gore's re-election. Even the *Daily Oklahoman* supported him as "the best candidate available." And as Billington observed, "[c]riticism of Gore's isolationist and pacifist tendencies, which played a large part in the Senator's defeat in 1920, did not influence voters to any extent in 1930."⁴⁸ In taking this stand Gore felt validated in his opinion that the change in the national mood throughout the war was the result of state propaganda and a deferential press. This "proof" was as a result important to that which he taught Vidal of the interdependence of government, the industrial interests and the press.

It was T.P. Gore's final term in the senate (1930 to 1936) that was to have the greatest immediate impact on Vidal's education for it was commensurate with his own childhood. The questions of the day and Gore's interpretation of them established certain themes that Vidal would return to throughout his writing. In his opposition to the administration of Franklin D. Roosevelt, Gore underscored the character of the country's political institutions in maintaining the exceptional system, the threat of a powerful presidency to that system, and the extent to which the machinations of propaganda and the press could be used to undermine it. The endorsement and partial rejection of the reactionary Gore's teachings founded Vidal's belief in a golden, imperial age. It would not be until the 1970s that Vidal would increasingly turn to the political activity of the young T.P. Gore as a resource for his own dissident politics.

Gore exemplified the pre-Roosevelt liberalism of the Democratic Party, characterised by a dedication to the principles of states' rights and laissez-faire. At

⁴⁸ Billington, *Gore*, 145, 146.

this time he was, as Vidal wrote, “a populist turned conservative.”⁴⁹ He opposed the relief bill put forward by the Republican Robert LaFollette, Jr. in 1931 on the grounds that it would lead to a dole. He likewise opposed deficit spending, and the intervention of the federal government into states’ rights.⁵⁰ The reforms introduced under Roosevelt’s New Deal moreover sent Gore into rebellion. “American traditions of political revolt,” Richard Hofstadter wrote, “had been based on movements against monopolies and special privileges in both the economic and the political spheres, against social distinctions and the restriction of credit, against limits on personal advancement.”⁵¹ The reforms introduced by the New Deal threatened this tradition, and induced opposition from erstwhile reformers such as Gore. He viewed them as disastrous because, as he later wrote to his grandson, they “changed the character of our institutions.”⁵² In a speech entitled ‘Americanism,’ Gore stated that “the greatness of our country depends on three things: the character of its natural resources, the character of its people, the character of its institutions.” He continued that the Constitution “solved the problem” of “how to reconcile power and freedom, how to harmonize government and liberty.”⁵³ To alter the balance inherent in the institutions it had created threatened the entire American experiment in government. He believed that the policies of Roosevelt epitomised such a threat.

Gore saw that in the pursuit of power Roosevelt represented a threat to capitalism because he opposed laissez-faire. In a speech entitled ‘A Square Deal is the Best Deal,’ Gore argued that unlike the New Deal Democrat, an advocate of the Square Deal would

⁴⁹ *Palimpsest*, 43.

⁵⁰ Billington, *Gore*, 149, 151.

⁵¹ Hofstadter, *Age of Reform*, 10.

⁵² T.P. Gore to Gene Vidal, June 7, 1940, 2. GVC, Box 133, Folder 4.

⁵³ T.P. Gore, ‘Americanism,’ 2, GVC, Box 132, Folder 4.

favour private property, private enterprise and private initiative, and legitimate business of every kind, whether large or small; and . . . equally oppose the economic royalist . . . and the economic sadist, who treats all business men as if they were criminals.⁵⁴

The Square Deal, a phrase used by Theodore Roosevelt in the election of 1904, was founded on the idea of occasional government intervention rather than government control. Gore advocated the return to such a policy. He wrote to his grandson that Roosevelt was a threat to this because he “has as much been opposed to private capital and private enterprise” as “Stalin, Hitler or Mussolini.” For Gore, the pragmatic, opportunistic Roosevelt used the economic crisis in order to expand the powers of the presidency and become such a dictator. “He is not fettered by principles,” he continued.

He has exactly as much conscience as a weather-vane and is as faithful to the course of the prevailing breeze . . . He worships at the shrine of Power and Popularity. He seeks popularity as an end within itself. It inflates and flatters his egotism. He also seeks it as a means to an end—to have and to hold power. I say power although nothing less than omnipotence is commensurate with his ambition.⁵⁵

Gore charged that, in the pursuit of power, Roosevelt would abandon the American political system, and that his economic policies threatened the ideas on which such a system had been built.

In the Senate Gore accordingly opposed the centralised control exercised by the federal government. He believed that the New Deal was a guise for advancing socialism, and that it would drive out private enterprise entirely. Instead he called for the revival of world trade through the “re-establishment of an international standard of value and payment.” This stand led to his downfall. His continued opposition to the dole resulted in a February 1935 anti-Gore rally in Oklahoma. He responded that the votes of the political leaders who came out in support were clearly for sale, and

⁵⁴ T.P. Gore, ‘A Square Deal is the Best Deal’ (nd), 2. Ibid.

⁵⁵ T.P. Gore to Gene Vidal, June 7, 1940, 2-3.

added, "I cannot consent to buy votes with the people's money."⁵⁶ Gore thought that the dole would rob people of their initiative. As he later wrote to his grandson, the most "fatal defect in the New Deal" was that it

spoiled the character and the morale, spoiled the souls of millions of our people. I have always thought that self-respect is the sheer anchor of human character. As long as it holds there is hope. When it breaks there is no hope, nothing left.⁵⁷

"Thus speaks the Protestant conscience," Vidal wrote of this letter in *Palimpsest*, "not to mention, alas, Herbert Hoover."⁵⁸ The political strategies of Gore and the former Progressive Hoover had proved increasingly irrelevant to the economic system from which the Depression sprang. Gore's opposition to the popular reforms of the '30s thus brought an end to his political career. He was defeated in the 1936 primary campaign by a New Deal candidate. Thereafter he practised law and concentrated on the education of his grandson for a life of political service.

The evolution of Vidal's political mind was as a result informed by Gore's continued opposition to Roosevelt. When Vidal enrolled at Philips Exeter Academy in 1940 this education provided the foundation for his emergence as a prominent debater. Gore was an advocate of debate as an important factor in political training. "Debating," he said, "teaches a person to stand on his hind legs and say what he thinks and to express what he believes in."⁵⁹ At Exeter Vidal joined the Academy Senate, the Golden Branch Debating Society and the G.L. Soule Debating Society. One of the principal topics that autumn term was the prospect of the United States entering the war in Europe. Vidal, who had only the previous year renamed himself

⁵⁶ Billington, *Gore*, 170.

⁵⁷ T.P. Gore to Gene Vidal, June 7, 1940, 12.

⁵⁸ *Palimpsest*, 64.

⁵⁹ Interview with Wasson, *Thomas Pryor Gore*, 10.

Gore Vidal by omitting his forenames Eugene Luther, spoke for the America First cause and in so doing reflected the political views of his grandfather.

The Committee to Defend America First had been created in September 1940. It proposed that "American democracy can be preserved only by keeping out of the European war."⁶⁰ It drew support from the isolationists in Congress, and such prominent public figures as the motor-car baron Henry Ford and the aviator Charles Lindbergh. The opposition, led by the Committee to Defend America by Aiding the Allies, was drawn predominantly from the eastern seaboard and the establishment press.⁶¹ America First was a product of the isolationism that had informed the politics of T.P. Gore. It stood, as Bill Kauffman summarised, for "limited and decentralised government, strict adherence to the Bill of Rights, and the maintenance of an army whose sole purpose was the protection of American soil."⁶² It therefore reinforced opposition to the political trends toward a planned economy and the increased power of the federal government inaugurated under the New Deal.

In the debate between the isolationists and the interventionists Vidal built on the opposition to Roosevelt T.P. Gore had nurtured throughout the 1930s. In one of his earlier speeches, Vidal charged that Roosevelt was loyal not to the anti-war platform on which he was re-elected in 1940, but to power.

Now we are able to see with what calculated cunning our reinstated president went about his task of accumulating supreme power. Cautiously he manoeuvred the nation into the position of a potential ally of Britain . . . Yet ostensibly he had not wavered from his promise to keep America out of the war. History is repeating itself, for not so very long ago another president was making campaign promises to keep this nation from war, and as we now know he was plotting and working to bring about a military alliance with the Allies.

⁶⁰ Cited in Wayne S. Cole, *Roosevelt and the Isolationists* (Lincoln, 1983), 381.

⁶¹ William Manchester, *The Glory and the Dream* (London, 1975), 223.

⁶² Bill Kauffman, *America First!* (1995), 19.

T.P. Gore's condemnation of Roosevelt and prior opposition to Wilson, which had been given further validity in Charles Callan Tansill's *America Goes to War* (1938) and H.C. Peterson's *Propaganda for War: The Campaign against American Neutrality, 1914-1917* (1939), informed this speech. Vidal accordingly characterised Roosevelt's policies as a reflection of a thirst for power. The historical circumstance of war, he argued, allowed him to further consolidate that power. The nation, he concluded of the Roosevelt presidency, "has at last come under the regime that has been foretold by our forefathers as the Armageddon of American democracy and freedom." Throughout the Depression, he explained, Roosevelt "rendered the Congress and the Supreme Court powerless to aught but his will."⁶³ The lesson of the New Deal years was therefore that Roosevelt would only use the crisis in Europe to extend his dictatorship.

The lesson provided by the American entry into the war in 1917 was likewise central to T.P. Gore's understanding of the Roosevelt administration's foreign policy. Gore had argued that the powers invested in the presidency throughout the war represented a threat to the democratic system. He theorised that there might one day be a president "of domineering disposition, a man of vaulting ambition," who would, if there were at the same time "a subservient Congress," be able to assume the position of dictator.⁶⁴ Throughout the crisis of the Depression, and against the background of increased tension within Europe, he had recognised Roosevelt as such a leader.

What proved of equal importance to Vidal's education were Gore's warnings against coercion through propaganda in the event of another war in Europe. In his April 1935 speech 'I Hope That We Can Preserve Peace and Prevent War,' Gore

⁶³ Untitled speech, nd (1940? written in pencil), 1, 2, GVC, Box 33, Folder 4.

⁶⁴ Billington, *Gore*, 100.

drew out the extent to which British propaganda had resulted in the American intervention in 1917. "How far our entry into war was attributable to the course of events in Europe and how far it was attributable to the subtle and sinister propaganda in this country I cannot tell," he stated. He then quoted the popular writer Sir Gilbert Parker from *Harper's Monthly Magazine*, March 1918.

We advised and stimulated many people to write articles; we utilized the friendly service and assistance of confidential friends; we had reports from important Americans constantly; and established association, by personal correspondence, with influential and eminent people of every profession in the United States, beginning with university and college presidents, professors, and scientific men, and running through all ranges of the population.

Parker outlined the endeavours made to court the American polity. Gore indicated that American entry into the war was therefore not the result of democracy in action but of a conspiracy. The American people elected Wilson on an anti-war platform, he continued, and he should have therefore adhered to that platform. "Yet the United States entered the war with all its tragic consequences." War, he concluded, was not what the people wanted, but that they were made to want by "insidious" disinformation.⁶⁵ It was against such manipulation that Vidal warned in his assault on Roosevelt diplomacy. It was his consequent understanding of the media as instrumental to the dissemination of propaganda that would be characteristic of his work as a writer.

HOLLYWOOD AND THE WORK OF PROPAGANDA

The interventionist propaganda T.P. Gore warned against in 1935 resurfaced in the opposition to the America First movement. By 1941, Wayne S. Cole wrote in *Roosevelt and the Isolationists*, "any individual who spoke out on the

⁶⁵ T.P. Gore, 'I Hope That We Can Preserve Peace and Prevent War,' *Congressional Record*, August 24, 1935.

noninterventionist side was suspect and had to be prepared to have his reputation besmirched and . . . his loyalty questioned.”⁶⁶ In January 1941, Charles Lindbergh stated that “nothing is gained by public commentary on your feeling in regard to one to one side of a war in which your country is not taking part,” and that America should “be receptive to a negotiated peace.”⁶⁷ He was attacked as unpatriotic, and indeed a supporter of the German cause, because he did not denounce Nazi doctrine.⁶⁸ Yet as Bill Kauffman made clear, the America First movement was founded on principles that were, rather unlike the New Deal state, “the antithesis of fascism, with its emphasis on a planned economy, the transfer of power from the provinces to the capital, a huge government workforce, and bloodletting expansionist crusades.”⁶⁹ Lindbergh was nevertheless systematically misrepresented as the personification of fascism in what Vidal termed “a dedicated conspiracy to destroy [his] reputation as hero.”⁷⁰ The aim of this conspiracy, intervention in the war, was, moreover, pervasive throughout the entire media from the principal newspapers to the increasingly hawkish cinema.⁷¹

The idea of America First had to a certain extent already been demonised in Hollywood cinema. The erroneous charge that it was allied with the pro-Nazi German-American Bund had already been given credence by such work as *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* (1939). Although the film industry was under pressure from the Breen office, the official censor, and from Congress itself, it had made significant moves toward the imaginative mobilisation of the war effort by the late 1930s. The controversy reached new heights when Warner Brothers released

⁶⁶ Cole, *Roosevelt and the Isolationists*, 418.

⁶⁷ Cited in A. Scott Berg, *Lindbergh* (London, 1998), 415.

⁶⁸ There is some controversy over Lindbergh’s alleged Nazi sympathies. Berg concludes that while Lindbergh was charmed by Hitler, and admired his political organisation, he did not support his social policies. Yet what was “hearsay” became “history.” He also wrote definitively that “Lindbergh was never associated with any pro-Nazi or anti-Semitic organisation.” Berg, *Lindbergh*, 384.

⁶⁹ Kauffman, *America First!*, 19.

⁷⁰ ‘The eagle is grounded,’ *TLS*, October 30, 1998, 3.

⁷¹ Manchester, *Glory*, 223.

Confessions of a Nazi Spy. The plot was based on a series of newspaper articles written by a former FBI agent which documented the trial of a Nazi spy ring in 1937. The three main points, the film historian Nick Roddick summarised, were “that Hitler’s aim is the subversion of American democracy,” and “that his organisation is well established in the United States.” The target of the attack was the German-American Bunds, characterised by the narrator as “half-witted, hysterical crackpots who go Hitler-happy.” Their leader, Dr. Kessel, instructs his followers that in their attack on American democracy, their “watchword call will be ‘America for Americans,’ ” and their aim to encourage “dissent and class hatred.”⁷² This representation in effect conformed to the government propaganda issued throughout the First World War which branded T.P. Gore as a German sympathiser rather than a patriot who argued for American exceptionalism. Although isolationism struck the predominant chord in 1939, *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* marked a turning point.⁷³ It is therefore significant to an understanding of how T.P. Gore’s brand of isolationism was increasingly demonised.

The understanding that it was through propaganda that an essentially isolationist country was driven toward war determined how Vidal in retrospect perceived the age of Roosevelt. In *Screening History* (1992) he described the extent to which British propaganda was at work in the years preceding the Second World War. “On our screens, in the thirties,” he recalled, “it seemed as if the only country on earth was England.” The style of such “gallant-little-England” films would be to pit freedom against a tyrannous dictator. Of the British production *Fire Over England* (1937), which screened the 1588 defeat of the Spanish armada, Vidal wrote,

the script assures us that the struggle between little England and great Spain is actually a ‘war of ideas,’ something that might have given the original Elizabeth a good laugh, but caused our heads to nod solemnly as we realized that our common Anglo past was again in peril, or as Lord Burleigh puts

⁷² Nick Roddick, *A New Deal in Entertainment* (London, 1983), 162, 163.

⁷³ Clayton R. Koppes and Gregory D. Black, *Hollywood Goes to War* (1987), 27.

it, "We are servants in an old house who train the new servants." That was us alright, new servants of the old British empire.⁷⁴

This understanding of cinema as propaganda is to apply the teachings of T.P. Gore concerning the First World War to the progression toward the Second. As the establishment press was used to induce a consciousness of war in the 1910s, so was the cinema used in the 1930s. Nevertheless, in terms of Vidal's political education, the cinema introduced an imaginative contradiction that challenged the rhetoric of his grandfather. In retrospect Vidal described the extent to which it was used to overturn the tradition of isolationism, and to ground the interventionism that would lead to war. At the time it introduced ideas about the geopolitical role of the United States that would lead Vidal to distance himself at war's end from the isolationism of T.P. Gore.

It is from the conflict between his political heritage and the legacy of 1930s cinema that Vidal emerged as a writer. In *Screening History* Vidal described himself as an avid cinema-goer throughout his formative years. "My life has paralleled," he wrote, "the entire history of the talking picture." "I was," he continued, "besotted by movies." The significance of this is drawn out in the following paragraph.

I don't think that anyone has ever found startling the notion that it is not *what* things are that matter so much as *how* they are perceived. We perceive sex, say, not as it demonstrably is but as we think it ought to be as carefully distorted for us by the churches and the schools, by the press and by—triumphantly—the movies, which are, finally, the only validation to which that dull anterior world, reality, must submit.

The power of the cinematic fiction, Vidal reasoned, is that it can wield a far greater influence than the education system for it appeals not to the prosaic world of reality but to the imagination. In so doing it defined the prospect for this reality and is therefore a political medium. This is precisely what Vidal described in his reading of

⁷⁴ *SH*, 39, 42, 45-46.

the 1937 production *The Prince and the Pauper*. The message of this Merrie-England drama was that “a good king will listen to the people and help them.”⁷⁵ This was of critical importance in the age of social and political upheaval inaugurated by the Depression. In response to the crisis Roosevelt had reinvented the presidency on such terms. This, as George Reedy observed, “began the period when the White House became the focal point of the nation’s social, economic, and political life.”⁷⁶ On a subliminal level the cinema countered T.P. Gore’s representation of the Roosevelt presidency as a threat to the political fabric of the republic.⁷⁷ It was the idea of the president as the political leader to whom the people should turn in a time of crisis that was to influence how Vidal later understood the presidency. His move from isolationism to his own idiosyncratic imperialism after the war moreover mirrored that of Hollywood and, in turn, the country.

On the surface Hollywood was to all intents and purposes isolationist throughout the 1930s.⁷⁸ This meant it did not much dramatise international politics. Nevertheless, Warner Brothers, from whose studios the Merrie-England dramas came, was decidedly political. In his study *A New Deal in Entertainment*, Nick Roddick described it as the studio which “most enthusiastically reflected the New Deal.”⁷⁹ From its social-conscience to its military-adventure films, Warner Brothers associated itself closely with Roosevelt thinking. In the wake of increasing anti-semitism in Europe, moreover, the studio moved further toward preparedness, and increased the production of films that advocated military strength. “Long before the United States entered the war,” the film historian Stephen Vaughn noted, “studios had tried to warn about subversive activities, to kindle Americanism, to enhance the

⁷⁵ Ibid., 6, 26.

⁷⁶ George Reedy, *The Twilight of the American Presidency*, revised edition (1987), 10.

⁷⁷ SH, 26.

⁷⁸ Colin Shindler, *Hollywood Goes to War* (London, 1979), 2.

⁷⁹ Roddick, *New Deal*, 65.

image of the military, and to promote the British cause.”⁸⁰ As an adult Vidal wrote about this with clarity, but as a child this element was outwith the protective teachings of his grandfather precisely because it worked not within the limits of political rhetoric but within the realm of the imagination. His later understanding of the extent to which Hollywood could be used to redetermine how the nation understood itself was moreover a product of his own bewitchment throughout the 1930s.

THE OZ BOOKS

Vidal has variously singled out three great influences that came to define his concerns as a writer. The first is T.P. Gore, the second is Hollywood, and the third is the Oz books of L. Frank Baum. The 1977 essay ‘The Oz Books’ is a testament to this. Vidal recalled that rather than simply reading them, he was, “translating” himself to Oz, “a place which I was to inhabit for many years while, simultaneously, visiting other fictional worlds as well as maintaining my cover in that dangerous one known as ‘real.’ ”⁸¹ Other significant fictional worlds were those of Edgar Rice Burroughs and E. Nesbit. In the case of Burroughs, Vidal argued, the books provided material for daydreams about power, and “the ability to dominate one’s environment through physical strength,” which is in keeping with his opposition to his mother and certainly school as an unbearable constraint.⁸² The strength of Nesbit’s fiction, in particular “the trilogy which involves the Five Children,” (*Five Children and It, The Phoenix and the Carpet, The Story of the Amulet*) was for Vidal in her use of “let’s-imagine-that” rather than the more prosaic “how-to-do” favoured by librarians. This,

⁸⁰ Stephen Vaughn, *Ronald Reagan in Hollywood* (Cambridge, 1994), 94.

⁸¹ ‘The Oz Books,’ *US*, 1095. (*NYRB*, September 29 and October 13, 1977.)

⁸² ‘Tarzan Revisited,’ *US*, 1126. (*Esquire*, December 1963.) Vidal wrote that he was more interested in the Tarzan books pre-puberty and thereafter in the Mars books.

he wrote, raised the imagination to “a level more considerably interesting than the usual speculation on what it will be like to own a car and make money.”⁸³ The reader would therein be equipped to imagine a greater possibility and to start on the road to the exceptional society. For an understanding of Vidal’s intellectual development the Oz books stand out for they raised questions that had a bearing on the age of Roosevelt, the Golden Age of Hollywood cinema, and the teachings of T.P. Gore. This added not so much to the political debate of the 1930s, but to the imagery of the strong leader put forward by the subliminal propaganda of Hollywood cinema.

At a certain level Baum’s Oz books, which were published between 1900 and 1920, integrated the teachings of T.P. Gore with the idea of the strong ruler as the one who would maintain the ideal society. From the third book on the political organisation of Oz was on one level consistent with the age of Roosevelt. Princess Ozma, who is discovered at the end of the second book, *The Marvellous Land of Oz* (1902), governs Oz and is the sole ruler to whom all deferred.⁸⁴ In this capacity she is the central figure on whom the inhabitants of Oz depend for their welfare. “There were no poor people in the Land of Oz,” Baum wrote in *The Emerald City of Oz* (1910), the first Oz book Vidal read, “because there was no such thing as money, and property of every sort belonged to the ruler. The people were her children and she cared for them.”⁸⁵ She is, in other words, the good ruler, like Edward VI in *The Prince and the Pauper*. Yet although the feudal system of Oz reflected the Old World it did bear a certain relation to the ideals of the Populists. While it did not endorse the idea of democracy, Oz offered an imaginative solution to the great debate between Jefferson and Hamilton. In Oz, Vidal wrote, Baum

⁸³ ‘E. Nesbit’s Magic,’ US, 1122, 1124. (NYRB, December 3, 1964.)

⁸⁴ Ozma, who is the rightful ruler of Oz, had been turned into the farmboy Tip when she was a baby. When this is discovered Tip is turned back into Ozma by Glinda. This is illuminating when read in light of Myra Breckinridge.

⁸⁵ L. Frank Baum, *The Emerald City of Oz*, 1910 (London, 1985), 27.

represents the pastoral dream of Jefferson (the slaves have been replaced by magic and good will); and into this Eden he introduces forbidden knowledge in the form of black magic (the machine) which good magic (the values of the pastoral society) must overwhelm.

The values of the agrarian golden age governed Baum's Oz. That Ozma limited the practice of magic, Vidal noted, enhanced the society, "just as controlled industrialization could enhance (and perhaps even salvage) a society like ours."⁸⁶ This is the essence of Populism. Of course, as a child Vidal would not have possessed the critical tools to consciously make this connection. Yet the very demonstration of it in fiction was correlative to Populist thought and (although there was a deep ideological contrast) to state control in the New Deal. It was from such an integration of ideas that Vidal would reconceive the teachings of his grandfather and redefine the prospect for America in the wake of the momentous changes brought about by the Second World War.

The works of Burroughs, Nesbit and Baum were, Vidal wrote, about possibility, and as such provided an imaginative landscape on which the questions of his immediate reality could be worked out. "[T]hose books (films, television, too, alas) read in childhood," he concluded, "do more to shape the imagination and its style than all the later calculated readings of acknowledged masters." That such reading worked at the level of his imagination, and therefore separate from Gore's teachings, moves toward an explanation for why Vidal would advocate the Pax Americana after the war. The work of Burroughs, in particular the Mars books, endorsed such an idea. As V.G. Kiernan noted, in the third Mars book, *The Warlord of Mars* (1920), Burroughs took up the theme of international relations and endorsed Woodrow Wilson's proposition for a League of Nations. "[T]here is no question," Kiernan wrote, "of Mars being conquered by America, only by American ideals."⁸⁷

⁸⁶ 'The Oz Books,' 1119.

⁸⁷ V.G. Kiernan, *America: The New Imperialism* (London, 1978), 166.

The ideal society of Oz moreover reconciled the conflict between North and South, between the rhetorical idealism of Jefferson's agrarian society and the Hamiltonian industrial city. It "solved the problem," as T.P. Gore said of the Constitution, of "how to reconcile power and freedom, how to harmonize government and liberty."⁸⁸ Power and freedom were reconciled under the leadership and control of Ozma, and each threat to the harmony of the kingdom was brought under her control. On an imaginative level this was, along with Burroughs' Mars books, a blueprint for the *idea* of a Pax Americana.

The post-bellum conflict between the values of North and South informed L. Frank Baum's intellectual development. Born in upstate New York in 1856, Baum was of a generation that lived through the emergence of the United States as an industrial society in the wake of the Civil War. He supported William Jennings Bryan in the elections of 1896 and 1900. This would prove significant in his creation of Oz for the Populist movement that supported the Democratic candidate Bryan was in America, as Richard Hofstadter wrote, "the first modern political movement of practical importance to insist that the federal government has some responsibility for the common weal; indeed, it was the first such movement to attack seriously the problems created by industrialism."⁸⁹ Vidal reasoned that although Baum "was not political in the usual sense, he had very definite ideas about the way that world should be."⁹⁰ Although it was feudal, the political idealism of Oz certainly provided a balance between agrarianism and the industrial society as the series progressed. The interdependence of ruler and subject moved centre stage in the third book, *Ozma of Oz* (1907). It offered neither a Jeffersonian nor a Hamiltonian society, but a

⁸⁸ T.P. Gore, 'Americanism,' 2.

⁸⁹ Hofstadter, *Age of Reform*, 61.

⁹⁰ 'The Oz Books,' 1099.

combination of both. Vidal's understanding of the post-war Pax Americana as an extension of the exceptional society can be understood as a reflection of this vision.

It is therefore significant that in his reading of the Oz books Vidal raised the question of how the exceptional society was undermined not by the conflict between Jeffersonian and Hamiltonian ideas but by the Puritan morality which predated them. He argued that any balance between North and South was rendered unworkable by Puritanism, which he identified as the grounds on which the consumer society denied any realisation of the exceptional state. This was evident, Vidal argued, in the fact that many librarians refused to stock the Oz series.

Essentially, our educators are Puritans who want to uphold the Puritan work ethic. This is done by bringing up American children in such a way that they will take their place in society as diligent workers and unprotesting consumers. Any sort of literature that encourages a child to contemplate alternative worlds might incite him, later in life, to make changes in the iron puritan order that has brought us, along with missiles and atomic submarines, the assembly line at Detroit where workers and systematically dehumanized.

This is a theme consistent throughout Vidal's writing. As a political experiment, he observed, the United States was founded on a contradiction. In a review of Richard Hofstadter's collection of essays *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* he wrote "the North American continent was meant, literally, to be God's country," until "[i]nto this heaven, *they* came: the secular-minded eighteenth-century sceptics who proceeded to organise the United States along freethinking lines."⁹¹ The exceptional society was, from the start, under threat from the Puritan morality it threatened to displace. For a society that functioned on Puritan values the covenant of social and political freedom promised by the Declaration of Independence was for Vidal unrealisable.

⁹¹ 'Paranoid Politics,' *US*, 769. (*New Statesman*, January 13, 1967.)

Nevertheless, the political rhetoric of T.P. Gore and the fictional world of Oz were for Vidal separate from the moralising of Puritanism. His understanding of democracy in America was theoretical and idealistic, which as a result brought him into conflict with the language of 'the people' in the era after the Second World War. As a writer and as an historian Vidal envisions and reenvisions the history of the United States within what Alexis de Tocqueville termed an aristocratic tradition. While the historian of the democratic age, de Tocqueville wrote, would "assign great general causes" to all events, the historian of the aristocratic age would be interested in "the will and character of certain individuals."⁹² Throughout his historical works, Vidal is interested in the creation of history by such individuals as Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, William Randolph Hearst. In his satirical work he is likewise interested in individuals, messianic figures such as John Cave (*Messiah* [1954]) and Myra Breckinridge (*Myra Breckinridge* [1968]), who endeavour to lead and to redefine the great majority. His understanding of the power of the individual to shape history is grounded in his own childhood reading.

Accordingly, in 'The Oz Books,' Vidal quoted an exchange between the Scarecrow and the Wooglegub which demonstrated how Baum envisioned the significance of the individual. "I am convinced," the Scarecrow declared, "that the only people worthy of consideration in this world are the unusual ones. For the common folk are like the leaves of a tree, and live and die unnoticed."⁹³ Vidal followed this with a quotation from Martin Gardner, who described this view as "despicable." Vidal countered,

the view is not at all despicable. For one thing, it would be the normal view of an odd magical creature who cannot die. For another, Baum was simply echoing those neo-Darwinians who dominated most American thinking for at least a century.⁹⁴

⁹² Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* 1835 (1956), 185.

⁹³ Baum, *The Marvellous Land of Oz* 1904 (London, 1985), 127.

⁹⁴ 'The Oz Books,' 1109.

It is the equal right to excel and not the equal right to conform that is the rule in Oz, as it was on the frontier from which T.P. Gore came. "The power to excel is not quite the same as the desire to excel," Gore wrote to his grandson in 1940. "You know, a Texas 'jack rabbit' has a habit of running on three feet until pressed by the hounds, then he puts down his fourth foot and runs off and leaves them."⁹⁵ From his political education and from his childhood reading, Vidal learned that the liberty of the individual, and not the popular idea of equality, defined the democratic society. In the early years of adulthood, from the publication of *The City and the Pillar* to the Eisenhower era, he learned that equality meant conformity within the terms of Puritan morality. This did not square with his own political education.

Vidal was educated within a political tradition that fought for the rights of the individual. It challenged the post-bellum industrial class because it understood its practices as a threat to such rights. Throughout the Cold War he came to understand that the United States functioned not as a democracy but what de Tocqueville termed a "manufacturing aristocracy."⁹⁶ Yet within the rhetoric of democracy this is interpreted as another lunatic conspiracy theory. In his essay 'The Paranoid Style in American Politics,' Richard Hofstadter described the Populist charge that an international conspiracy of bankers was the cause of economic hardship as representative of an idea which had been an American trait from the time of the Revolution. To oppose "the rising tide of religious infidelity or Jeffersonian democracy" the Puritan warned against a conspiracy whose object, in the words of the preacher Abiel Abbott, was "the destruction of all religion and civil order."⁹⁷ In this democratic essay, Hofstadter appended Populism to a litany of insane conspiracies which climaxed with the McCarthy era in the early 1950s. While it is

⁹⁵ T.P. Gore to Gene Vidal, May 4, 1940.

⁹⁶ Tocqueville, *Democracy*, 220.

⁹⁷ Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* (London, 1966), 13, 14.

true that Populist ideologues simplified economic problems by turning them, as C. Vann Woodward wrote, “into a rural melodrama,” their understanding that the industrial class threatened the liberty of the individual was far more accurate than the ravings of McCarthy.⁹⁸ T.P. Gore underscored this view in his teachings.

For Vidal, the lesson of Gore’s (and indeed Baum’s) teachings was that the prospect of the exceptional society would never be secured under the will of the majority. “I do not admire ‘the people,’ ” he said in a 1969 interview. “Their folk wisdom is usually false, their instincts predatory. Even their sense of survival—so highly developed in the individual—goes berserk in the mass.” Vidal consequently blamed “our puritan intolerance of other races and cultures, combined with a national ethos based entirely upon human greed,” for the failure of the American experiment in government.⁹⁹ Yet it was the manufacturing aristocracy which had throughout the Cold War metastasised into a corporate state that he denounced for the continued exploitation of prejudice in the quest for profit.

“Nothing appears more surprising to those who consider human affairs with a philosophical eye,” David Hume wrote in *Of The First Principles of Government*, “than the easiness by which the many are governed by the few, and the implicit submission with which men resign their own sentiments and passions to those of their rulers.”¹⁰⁰ It is the control exercised by the corporate aristocracy through the conduit of the mass media to which Vidal is opposed. “As the whole world is more and more linked by satellites,” he wrote in *Screening History*, “the world’s view of the world can be whatever a producer chooses to make it.”¹⁰¹ He argued that as a result of this control the influence of the industrial class had become so enmeshed in

⁹⁸ C. Vann Woodward, *The Burden of Southern History* (Baton Rouge, 1960), 154.

⁹⁹ *VFW*, 306. (1969.)

¹⁰⁰ Cited, ‘Cue the Green God, Ted,’ *US*, 1031. (*The Nation*, August 7-14, 1989.)

¹⁰¹ *SH*, 32.

the social and political system it was no longer discernible. There is, he wrote, therefore no need for a single conspiracy because the corporate boardrooms which own the media, and the journalists that work for them, are educated within the same system and all think "exactly alike on those economic questions that really matter."¹⁰² Vidal is not a conspiracy theorist nor indeed is he an agrarian philosopher. Yet he is aware that in the writings of Jefferson there are ideals which an exceptional society should strive to attain. His understanding of these ideals is informed by the history of the South and the imaginative reformation of such ideals in the fictional landscape of Oz.

Thus do the biographical pieces fall into place: a political education grounded in a golden age of Jeffersonian democracy; a school system which was understood as a threat to his intellectual autonomy; an imaginative playground in the form of Hollywood cinema, the works of Edgar Rice Burroughs, E. Nesbit and L. Frank Baum. The concerns of Vidal's writing were clearly established in his formative years and it is evident that even as a political sophisticate he has never lost the innocence of his childhood idealism. His idea of America as a political frontier was informed by the teachings of his grandfather. His understanding that the exceptional society could be achieved through the leadership of a strong individual was informed by Hollywood and the political idealism of Baum's Oz. His criticism of the political evolution of the United States throughout the Cold War was informed by the disappointment of such ideas. His criticism of the media was informed by the fact that it spoke the language of democracy while at the same time the country was clandestinely being turned into a national security state. The United States, Vidal argued, is as a result a country sustained by myths. His work is an attempt to measure the history of the country against the principles on which it was founded in order to demythologise the corrupt state it had become.

¹⁰² 'Time for a People's Convention,' VI, 189. (*The Nation*, January 27, 1992.)

In Search of a Subject, 1946-1954

Gore Vidal's progression from the isolationist teachings of his grandfather toward an understanding of the post-war era as a golden age for American literature was linked closely to the events of his own life. In *Palimpsest*, Vidal wrote that throughout his formative years he was confined to a prison not of his own making. In July 1935 his parents were divorced. In October his mother married a rich stockbroker, Hugh D. Auchincloss. He then moved to the Auchincloss mansion Merrywood, "a place," Fred Kaplan wrote, "without intellect or art, a place of Philistines."¹ From Merrywood Vidal was sent to board at the Washington school St. Albans. Of this time he wrote "[t]he life of the imagination became more and more intense as the reality about me became more unendurable."² School proved to be a constraint on his intellect.

I have never in my life been so bored as I was in the classrooms at Exeter . . . [I]t seemed to me that there was a conspiracy not only to make one learn things one did not want or need to know but, worse, to refuse to teach the things one was eager to find out about.³

T.P. Gore's attack on Roosevelt as a dictator and on the New Deal as a political prison had a certain biographical resonance against such a background. Yet his period of service in the Second World War enabled Vidal to break free of these constraints. As a result he was forced to reassess the pre-war teachings of his grandfather and to forge an identity of his own.

¹ Fred Kaplan, 'Introduction,' *The Essential Gore Vidal* (1999), x.

² *Palimpsest*, 83.

³ *Screening History*, 93-94.

For Vidal the post-war era marked a cultural renaissance for the United States. "Between the end of the Second World War in 1945 and the beginning of the Korean War in 1950," he wrote in 1974, "there was a burst of creative activity throughout the American empire as well as in our client states of Western Europe."⁴ This renaissance was a product of the spoils of war. The literary persona he endeavoured to carve out for himself in these, the early days of his career, was relative to his country's emergence as the dominant world power. Nevertheless, his hubristic view of this era was on one level grounded in the nativist arrogance of T.P. Gore. On December 13, 1941, six days after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Gore wrote to his grandson, "since we have crossed the Rubicon I feel more inclined to unsheath my sword and go where the battle rages fiercest. We are in now and we must see it through, must teach the Japs the difference between the rising sun and the setting sun and teach the Aryans to be less arragant [*sic*]."⁵ Debate at Exeter was still fierce after the end of the America First movement, and "[l]ike his grandfather," Fred Kaplan noted, Vidal "continued to oppose Roosevelt but not the war."⁶ In a letter to Gore dated November 22, 1942, moreover, Vidal wrote that he

[g]ave a speech the other day on the post war world (hollow mockery that it is) but I received the biggest ovation that I have yet received; they, it seems, liked my ending which was: 'this is our world, which we shall in a few years guide to our liking... And this world tempered by the fires of war shall be ours, for you and me, and all of us together, *we are history*.' It is nice to tell the people what they want to believe.⁷

This letter mirrored Gore's position. The belief that America *is* history was nevertheless as fundamental to Vidal's thought in the post-war era as it was to the Truman Doctrine. Throughout the golden age of 1945 to 1950 Vidal's vision of the United States was consequently informed by the prejudices of his class, the teachings

⁴ 'Calvino's Novels,' *United States*, 476. (*NYRB*, May 30, 1974.)

⁵ T.P. Gore to Gene Vidal, December 13, 1941, 1, GVC Box 133, Folder 4.

⁶ Fred Kaplan, *Gore Vidal* (London, 1999), 136.

⁷ Cited *ibid.*, 143-144.

of his grandfather, and the idea of leadership drawn both from his childhood reading and from the Roosevelt era.

THE SUBORDINATION OF SOCIAL AND POLITICAL PROTEST FROM *WILLIWAW* (1946) TO *THE JUDGEMENT OF PARIS* (1952)

It is conventional wisdom in Vidal criticism that the eight novels from *Williwaw* (1946) to *Messiah* (1954) represent the first phase in Gore Vidal's artistic development. In his 1982 study *Gore Vidal*, Robert Kiernan described the work produced en route to *Julian* (1964), the ninth novel and "the first . . . of his artistic maturity," as bearing "the scars of experimentation."⁸ In their 1997 text book study *Gore Vidal: A Critical Companion*, Susan Baker and Curtis Gibson likewise characterised "the novels from that period are experiments in genre."⁹ What these works also demonstrate is the political evolution central to the identity Vidal forged for himself as a writer. In the search for both his voice and his subject throughout this phase of his writing he observed the trend toward the existential which characterised the literature of the 40s. Yet the questions this engendered led him back toward the social and political protest that characterised the literature of the 30s. In the progress from *Williwaw* to *Messiah*, Vidal learned not only how to write but how to make use of the political material central to his upbringing.

The idea of the writer that was predominant throughout the '40s determined how Vidal at first tried to establish himself as a serious novelist. In a lecture delivered in 1952 he stated that the model writers of the times "are obsessed with revelation and they cut through the busy surface of life, through minority problems, economics, to that protean center of each human being, to the spirit." He cited the

⁸ Robert Kiernan, *Gore Vidal* (1982), 8, 118.

⁹ Susan Baker and Curtis Gibson, *Gore Vidal: A Critical Companion* (Westport, Connecticut, 1997), 9.

work of Carson McCullers, Paul Bowles, and Tennessee Williams. The novel, he went on to argue, should represent the interior drama, for in the age of cinema it cannot “deal with social problems as effectively as the camera.”¹⁰ In these conclusions Vidal certainly reflected the critical standards of his time. In the wake of the prosperity released by the war, the serious writer started to move away from social conflict toward the inner world of the self. “Self knowledge was the subject that writers most persistently pursued,” Chester E. Eisinger wrote in *Fiction of the Forties*. The sense that the individual was threatened by the consumer society and the culture of conformity after the war led the writer to rely on “his private vision.”¹¹ This was concurrent with a renewed search for the absolute. In an era of social and political conservatism moreover, such esoteric philosophies insulated the writer from attack. “It is no wonder that Freudianism became the all but official psychology of post-war American intellectuals, and existentialism the philosophy,” Tony Hilfer wrote in his study *American Fiction Since 1940*.¹² Yet what Vidal appealed to in the search for self, as he wrote in the 1953 essay ‘Novelists and Critics of the 1940s,’ was the abandonment of such “external authority,” which he characterised as a struggle “against our condition, against the knowledge that our works and days have only value on the human scale.”¹³ To endorse an esoteric theory was for Vidal to impose a limit on what the writer *could* discover. This was to bring him into conflict with the prevalent idea of the serious novelist.

The nature of this conflict is indicated by a qualification Vidal made to his hope that the golden age would enable the writer to redefine the self in a world without “the secure authority of other times.” “There is as much to satirize, as much to protest as ever before,” he wrote, “and it will always be the task of the secondary

¹⁰ Untitled lecture (1952), 3, GVC, Box 33, Folder 1.

¹¹ Chester E. Eisinger, *Fiction of the Forties* (Chicago, 1965), 2, 19.

¹² Tony Hilfer, *American Fiction Since 1940* (London, 1992), 4.

¹³ ‘Writers and Critics of the 1940s,’ *US*, 16, 17. (*New World Writing* # 4, 1953.)

writer to create those useful public books whose momentary effect is as stunning as their literary value is not.”¹⁴ Such understanding was characterised, for example, by the popular reading of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852). As Edmund Wilson wrote in *Patriotic Gore* (1962), Harriet Beecher Stowe believed that “every worthy person in the United States must desire to preserve the integrity of our unprecedented republic,” and had set out to write a novel “to show how Negro slavery must disrupt and degrade this common ideal.” *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* met with tremendous sales and became part of the national debate over the institution of slavery, and yet it eventually came to be dismissed as “a mere propaganda novel.”¹⁵ Vidal was aware that his own writing tended toward social protest and yet he conformed to this understanding of literary value. In his 1952 lecture on the serious novelist he wrote “I am clearly not the sort of writer I admire.”¹⁶ Although he would come to decisively reject this narrow aesthetic interpretation, it forced him in his early works to render social and political protest subordinate to the inner life of the individual.

In addition, the social and political ideas that ordered his thinking certainly undermined this quest and marked the progression toward the kind of writer he was to become. Although these ideas are subordinate to the search for individual identity, Vidal found it impossible to separate the interior drama of the individual from them. Each of the early works had a political background Vidal was unable to bring it into focus because of his commitment to the interior drama. In *Screening History* he wrote that such fiction

was the work of victims who portrayed victims who, it was oddly assumed, would want to see their lives realistically portrayed. No one serious would dream of writing about our rulers—or victimizers—because what truly serious writer would have known—or wanted to know—them?¹⁷

¹⁴ Ibid., 15.

¹⁵ Edmund Wilson, *Patriotic Gore*, 1962 (1967), 3.

¹⁶ Untitled lecture (1952), 4.

¹⁷ *SH*, 78.

By the time he came to write *Messiah* the golden age was over. In this one book Vidal broadened the canvas of his work and started to write about the machinery through which the country was ruled. It was this break from the literary tradition of the age, and his return to the social and political protest taught by his grandfather, that would characterise 'Vidal's subsequent work. Yet from his second novel, *In a Yellow Wood* (1947), to his seventh, *The Judgement of Paris* (1952), the "experiments in genre" Vidal undertook suggested that he could not find the right medium for the literature he advocated.

Vidal's first completed novel, *Williwaw*, written between January and September 1945, was published in June 1946. The story centres around the journey of one Major Barkinson from Andrefski Bay in the Aleutian Islands, where Vidal was stationed as a warrant officer, to his headquarters on Arunja Island. All air traffic is grounded due to adverse weather conditions, so Barkinson insists on travelling by boat. The journey catalogues the boredom experienced by a crew of seven men. This reaches a climax when the ship is struck by a williwaw, a fierce wind that is a metaphor for the conflict engendered by the antagonism of the crew. Suspicion for the death of the chief engineer, Duval, who is swept overboard during the storm, is directed at the second mate, Bervick, the former's rival for the love of Olga, a prostitute. The crew protect Bervick through silence and the situation is unresolved. Barkinson, who had forced the crew to make the journey, condemns the first mate, Evans, for attempting the perilous voyage.

Williwaw reflects the existential tradition, and therefore, as the critic John Aldridge wrote, "contempt for all authority and law."¹⁸ The characters define their own laws within the confines of their own situation. "I think that despite its low

¹⁸ John Aldridge, *After the Lost Generation* (1951), 172.

key,” Vidal later wrote, “*Williwaw* still works, especially on the existential level: actions are only important to the degree *we* invest them with importance.” The novel was, moreover, written in what Vidal dubbed “the national manner.”¹⁹ Yet although he had adapted this style from writers such as Ernest Hemingway and Stephen Crane, “Vidal’s technique in *Williwaw* is one of explication and focuses on psychic surfaces,” Robert Kiernan noted. Hemingway’s technique, on the other hand, was “one of implication” and focused “on psychological depths.”²⁰ Throughout *Williwaw* Vidal is interested in the extent to which the masculinity of each crew member is a masquerade. This did not register with reviewers such as Orville Prescott, who read the novel as a hard, masculine tale about a place where the “liquor was expensive and hard to get, women were scarce and also expensive, and the same men saw too much of each other for too long under exasperating circumstances.”²¹ *Williwaw* was celebrated for certain cultural presuppositions about the masculinity that informed the existential angst characteristic of ‘40s fiction. Yet there is nonetheless a critique of such presuppositions which prefaced the concerns of the social and political work to follow.

In his second novel, *In a Yellow Wood*, Vidal tried to evaluate what the post-war era would mean to him as a writer. He started to write the book late in 1945 under the working title *The Myriad Faces*. It would deal with the potential loss of individual identity under the new economic prosperity. It describes one day in the life of the young war veteran and stockbroker Robert Holton. The subject is Holton’s choice between a safe career on Wall Street, or the less secure lifestyle of the artist offered by his wartime love, Carla Bankton. Holton’s boss, Mr. Heywood, stands for the point of view that work “is the only tangible thing in the chaos of living.” Carla on the other hand believes in the far more vague notion that “[o]ne should always try

¹⁹ ‘Author’s Note,’ *Williwaw*, 1946 (London, 1986), 9.

²⁰ Kiernan, *Vidal*, 35.

²¹ Orville Prescott, ‘Books of the Times,’ *NYT*, June 17, 1946, 19.

to do what one wants to do.”²² These conflicting beliefs represent the central dilemma of Holton’s day: to choose between his future in the brokerage house or the life of an artist advocated by Carla. *In A Yellow Wood* suggests that there are two choices open to the young war veteran in the golden age: to lose one’s individual identity under the new economic prosperity or to strike out as an artist. Vidal does not make it clear why Holton in the end chooses to remain a stockbroker. Nevertheless, the following novel, *The City and the Pillar*, suggests what the second option, the life of the artist, would mean for Vidal at this historical juncture.

Although *The City and the Pillar* was likewise committed to the question of the individual, Vidal had started to use social and political protest to define the cultural possibilities for the golden age. In his 1965 afterword to the reissue of the novel, he recalled “I knew how to do a few things well, and I did them all in *Williwaw*. By the time I came to write *The City and the Pillar* I was bored with playing it safe.”²³ *The City and the Pillar* was an attempt to exorcise the ghost of his adolescent love, Jimmie Trimble, who was killed at Iwo Jima in March 1945. It “described what *might* have happened,” Vidal wrote in *Palimpsest*, “had we met again years later.”²⁴ The catalyst for *The City and the Pillar* is the sexual encounter between Jim Willard and Bob Ford. When Bob leaves his home town to become a merchant seaman Jim romanticises their friendship. The story is that of his search for him. After an affair en route first with a film star and then a writer, Jim returns home to find that Bob is to be married. Bob soon visits the hopeful Jim in New York. Jim attempts to renew their physical friendship. When Bob refuses, Jim strangles him. The idea of this melodramatic denouement is that the romanticised past is destroyed and Jim is free to move on. Nevertheless, in the final analysis *The City and the Pillar*

²² *In a Yellow Wood*, 1947 (London, 1967), 104.

²³ ‘Afterword,’ *The City and the Pillar*, 1948 (London, 1965), 207.

²⁴ *Palimpsest*, 39.

is a work of social and political protest that transcends Willard's interior drama to make a statement.

The City and Pillar is informed by Vidal's belief in the political character of the United States. The career of T.P. Gore had taught him that the impediments outwith the idea of the exceptional society could be overcome. Under the Pax Americana, moreover, the world itself was the new frontier on which the values of the Old World could be destroyed. It was in this historical context, and as his addition to the debate over what the post-war ^{era} could mean, that Vidal chose to attack the taboo of homosexuality.

The City and the Pillar, which attained best seller status because of its notoriety, consequently made an important social statement in 1948. It was, furthermore, published a month before Alfred Kinsey's ground-breaking study, *Sexual Behaviour in the Human Male*. In his research into matrimonial difficulties, Kinsey found that there was little factual evidence concerning the sexual behaviour of human beings. Like *The City and the Pillar* his study challenged certain cultural myths concerning what had hitherto been termed perversion, which in effect meant sex outside of marriage. Kinsey found that eighty-five percent of American men had sexual intercourse before marriage, and that fifty percent of married men had committed adultery. More significant for Vidal was the report that four percent of men were exclusively homosexual throughout their lives, ten percent had for at least three years between the ages of sixteen and fifty-five been exclusively homosexual, and that thirty-seven percent had at least one homosexual experience. What Kinsey found, Vidal wrote in *Palimpsest*, was that "[p]erfectly 'normal' young men, placed outside the usual round of family and work, will run riot with each other."²⁵ Yet what was "normal" for Vidal was shocking to most. As William Manchester wrote in *The*

²⁵ Ibid., 102.

Glory and the Dream, it would be difficult “to recapture the innocence of sex before Kinsey.”²⁶ The belligerent response of the press nevertheless raised certain questions about the character of the golden age. Its emphasis on conformity over liberty would result in Vidal broadening the canvas of the social and political commentary.

Throughout the golden age Vidal was writing so fast that he acquired a backlog of work. His fourth novel, *The Season of Comfort* (1949), had been completed in 1947. By the time *The City and the Pillar* was published in January 1948 he was at work on his fifth. Late in 1946, when *The City and the Pillar* was completed, Vidal was therefore still concerned with writing about the individual, the “protean center of each human being,” rather than social and political questions its publication raised.²⁷ *The Season of Comfort* is an autobiographical search for that centre. There is no real plot as such. The novel follows William Gerard from birth, through school, to the break with his mother and the concurrent death of his close friend in the war. Furthermore, although it is informed by his experience, Vidal is concerned with the individual rather than the historical background against his material is set. It consequently reads, as Robert Kiernan wrote, as if it were “an autobiographical indulgence rather than a serious *roman à clef*.”²⁸ Nevertheless, *The Season of Comfort* does touch on certain themes that would recur with far more purpose in his later work.

The first chapter, for example, describes the family into which Gerard is born in June 1927. At the centre is his grandfather, Vice-President William Hawkins, who, it would seem, is modelled on T.P. Gore: the Democrat Hawkins came from “Populist beginnings,” and had opposed the 1917-1918 war, which he “regarded . . .

²⁶ William Manchester, *The Glory and the Dream* (London, 1975), 479.

²⁷ See note 10.

²⁸ Kiernan, *Vidal*, 123.

as Mr. Wilson's doing."²⁹ He would also go on to be an opponent of the New Deal. Vidal is however more interested in the portraits of Gerard's grandmother and his virago of a mother. Any political questions are backdrop to this. However, following the death of Hawkins, Vidal does touch briefly on the theme of authority and "the central man." In response to the visit of King George VI to Washington, D.C. in 1941, the narrator observes that the women of the house "needed the central man."

Today he was to be their symbol, and they were no longer aimless fragments but, for a time, satellites, with a path to follow. Silently, without reason, they had faith in him. It was difficult for the two women to have faith an idea, in an abstraction, but in a man, in a crown, they *could* have faith. He would, for a time, reduce the burden of their freedom.³⁰

In this passage Vidal draws a correlation between patriarchal attitudes and the idea of a ruler. He suggests that freedom, either personal or political, is difficult to maintain without the benevolent central man. This was the political message at the back of the New Deal and the Hollywood films that endorsed it. Yet Vidal does not address this question any further here and instead returns to it in *A Search for the King* (1950). For the remainder of *The Season of Comfort* he is more concerned with the rejection of the authority represented by Gerard's mother, and Gerard's adolescent love for his friend Jimmy Wesson. At the end of the novel, after Gerard has broken contact with his mother, he learns that Wesson is dead. In the last chapter, which, like the first, is called "the beginning," Gerard's adolescence is over and he is ready for adulthood.

The following book, *A Search for the King*, is an historical romance. It was written during Vidal's travels throughout Europe and North Africa in 1948. The story, set in the twelfth century, is of King Richard's troubadour Blondel and his search, both physical and spiritual, for his kidnapped king. Richard is captured and imprisoned by the Austrian duke Leopold while returning to England from the

²⁹ *The Season of Comfort*, 1949 (London, 1996), 18, 37.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 127-128.

Crusades in Palestine. In what would be characteristic of his approach to war, Vidal has Blondel decline the official justification “that the crusades were begun to free the tomb of Christ.”

There was treasure in the East and trade routes to India and the silk countries. Every country in Europe wanted control of the East, and happily someone remembered that Jerusalem contained the tomb of Christ and so the kings gathered armies, received Papal blessings and, accompanied by mitred bishops, sailed for Palestine.³¹

In his search Blondel undergoes a series of adventures that similarly dispel popular myth. He is variously imperilled by a giant, who is in fact an abnormally tall man, and werewolves, who turn out to be highwaymen in disguise. On finding King Richard he returns to England to report where the king is held. When Richard returns he is forced to fight his brother, John. At this time Blondel strikes up a friendship with a German boy, Karl, who represents the mythical ‘other’ with whom he could find completeness. Karl is killed in the battle. Like *The City and the Pillar* and *The Season of Comfort*, *A Search for the King* is therefore a rite of passage. In the face of victory Blondel is forced to confront the death of his own youth and that of the adolescent beloved.

A Search for the King is the story of Blondel’s unresolved quest for a secure moral and political centre. In the words of John Aldridge, “as the search progresses, Richard loses his practical function and becomes, in Blondel’s mind, the symbolic king who is the goal of all our searching.”³² That it is a king rather than a democratic ruler reflected the influence of 1930s Hollywood cinema and the political idealism of L. Frank Baum’s writing. Furthermore, when the ideas of T.P. Gore were in the post-war era no longer cogent for him, Vidal was in search of a moral authority that was consistent with the idea of an American exceptionalism. The death of Gore in March

³¹ *A Search for the King*, 1950 (London, 1993), 32.

³² Aldridge, *After the Lost Generation*, 182.

1949 only made this more urgent. In addition, as it was in *The City and the Pillar* and *The Season of Comfort*, the quest is an attempt to come to terms with the death of Jimmie Trimble and the concurrent end of Vidal's own youth at the end of the war. In the political works *Washington, D.C.* (1967), *Two Sisters: A Novel in the form of a Memoir* (1970), *Palimpsest: A Memoir* (1995) and *The Smithsonian Institution* (1998), Vidal would parallel the death of the nineteen year old Trimble with the end of American isolation and, consequently, democracy. In the earlier works however he was more committed to the idea of the golden age. The three books *The City and the Pillar*, *The Season of Comfort*, and *A Search for the King* suggest that Vidal had to consign the pain associated with his adolescence to the past before he could profit from the advantages of such an age. Nevertheless, these works employ personal material that Vidal would use as a political resource *only* after he was forced to abandon the illusions of youth.

Dark Green, Bright Red (1950), written in the early months of 1949, was the first in which the political rhetoric of the post-war empire began to fracture. The story is of a revolution in Central America and the involvement of the fruit growers "the Company" in its political arrangements. At the start of the novel General Alvarez, the former dictator of an unnamed country, has returned to start a revolution and oust its current leader, the socialist Ospina. This move is endorsed by the Company because Ospina's supporters "wanted to drive the Company out of the Republic and take over the Coast plantations themselves. This would wreck the Republic's economy: or so the general and his party reasoned." In the first part of the book, 'Dark Green,' Vidal describes the leaders of the revolution. The central protagonist, Peter Nelson, provides the perspective, which is that most of those involved are not visionaries but opportunists. The second part, 'BrightRed,' describes the failure of the revolution. It transpires that from the start the Company had used Alvarez to serve

their own ends. The Company had decided Ospina should be replaced with one Colonel Rojas after the its taxes were increased. Rojas is, however, an unknown, and as one of the conspirators informs Alvarez, “we couldn’t tell what line the State Department in Washington might take if one of their favorite governments . . . was thrown out by a military junta.” The idea was that Alvarez would therefore start a popular revolution in order to restore democracy and “[i]n the confusion we would take over.”³³ It is the ends of the Company rather than the ends of democracy that are ultimately served.

The catalyst for the novel was a conversation Vidal had with the president of the Guatemalan Congress, Mario Monteforte Toledo. Vidal had bought a house in Guatemala in 1946, and there would have, he wrote in *Palimpsest*, “splendid rows” with the “vaguely socialist” Toledo. Toledo told Vidal that his beleaguered government was unable to raise revenue through the taxation of the country’s principal employer, the United Fruit Company, due to pressure from the United States government. “I had known about our numerous past interventions in Central America,” Vidal wrote. “But that was past. Why should we bother now? We controlled most of the world.”³⁴ This was the start of his education into how the corporate machine had, through its financial support of the political machinery, increased its control over the world economy. This background is however subordinate to the plot of *Dark Green, Bright Red*, for once again Vidal is throughout concerned with the selfishness of the individual characters rather than their significance in the greater political picture. As Robert Kiernan wrote, the political question is ultimately a minor factor in a story more concerned with “human selfishness, for the characters from the general to the lowest Indian recruit are

³³ *Dark Green, Bright Red*, 1950 (London, 1995), 22, 281, 282. In 1968 a version edited to less than half the length of the original was published. The 1995 Deutsch edition is the original 1950 text.

³⁴ *Palimpsest*, 118, 119.

motivationally long on gratification and short on altruism.”³⁵ The revolution is not represented in the wider political context that was the catalyst for the book itself. This is merely referred to in the final pages. It was not until *Messiah* that Vidal would turn such concerns into a significant political resource.

Vidal’s seventh novel, *The Judgement of Paris* (1952), marked another turning point in his career. It was, he wrote, “the first book where I abandoned the somewhat affected, plain-plywood style of . . . ‘the national manner’ and spoke, as it were, in my own voice.”³⁶ This voice reflected the crash course in the eighteenth-century novel Vidal undertook in 1950. Henry Fielding had a decided influence over how the narrator described his hero, Philip Warren, as Bernard Dick first pointed out. Vidal envisioned the comic *Judgement of Paris*, Dick wrote, as “a novel on the order of *Tom Jones* (1749) where a sensuous but decent lad journeyed through a world of seducers eager to ensnare him in their fine meshes.”³⁷ The novel is far richer and far more accomplished than anything Vidal had written previously, although the change was more artistic than political. The story is that of the twenty-eight-year-old Harvard law school graduate, Philip Warren, and his year travelling through Europe and North Africa. The judgement of the title is that of his choice between the three women he encounters on his travels. The first is Regina Durham, a politician’s wife who would have him embark on a political career of his own. The second is Sophia Oliver, an archaeologist who would offer him knowledge. The third is Anna Morris, who would offer him love.

Throughout the novel Warren is troubled by the likelihood of a political career. His politics, he states in the opening chapter are “[d]arkly reactionary, I

³⁵ Kiernan, *Vidal*, 128.

³⁶ *Palimpsest*, 167.

³⁷ Dick, *Apostate Angel*, 67.

suppose. In practice, however, I should, if ever in office, devote my time to staying there.”³⁸ A political life is what is expected of Warren. This had a certain resonance for Vidal because in the late 1940s his grandfather had been preparing a political career for him. On a visit to Washington, D.C. in January 1946, T.P. Gore had outlined the possibility that Vidal could run as a presidential elector in New Mexico in 1948. Yet, as Fred Kaplan wrote, “[w]hen he returned to New York, that political road must have seemed less concrete, less alluring, than it had in his grandfather’s living room.” Writing *In A Yellow Wood* moreover made it clear “that he had another choice to make between a different set of divergent roads. One led to a political, the other to a literary career.”³⁹ Philip Warren is not so troubled. He is not artistic and is far more interested in the self. Yet what is significant is that in the end he chooses to look beyond that self. In the final paragraph, as he approaches his choice, Anna Morris, “the silver mirror dissolved before his eyes, dispelling its ghosts like smoke upon the night.”⁴⁰ He does not see in Morris a reflection of himself but the person that she is. He has, as Robert Kiernan noted, chosen to step outside of himself for the first time and into a future “that would involve more than the self-aggrandizement that Regina and Sophia would foster.”⁴¹

Like Robert Holton, the protagonist of *In A Yellow Wood*, Philip Warren makes a choice opposite to that which Vidal himself would make. Warren opts for love over politics and wisdom. Vidal on the other hand pursued the worlds represented by the other women. Durham understood the world through politics, whereas Oliver was bewitched by a prophet who foretold the coming of the messiah. “Some men feel more sensitively than others that some great event is pending,” Oliver instructs Warren. “Usually the less educated, more simple man is better able

³⁸ *The Judgement of Paris*, 1952 (1978), 15.

³⁹ Kaplan, *Vidal*, 207.

⁴⁰ *Judgement*, 280.

⁴¹ Kiernan, *Vidal*, 13.

to divine what the world wants than the educated man who relies too much upon logic, unaware of the simple need of the race which creates a messiah.”⁴² It was the conjunction of the political and mystical, and their significance in 1950s America, that Vidal would explore in *Messiah*. The thematic quest from *In A Yellow Wood* to *A Search for the King* seemed to be answered by the conclusion that one should learn to step outside of oneself. In writing *Messiah* Vidal would move beyond the critical standards of the late '40s, and engage with the history of his time in way he had not done previously.

INTERREGNUM: POLITICAL ISSUES IN THE BEST-SELLER MEDIUM

In the late '40s “serious fiction,” Vidal wrote in *Screening History*, “was the work of victims who portrayed victims for an audience of victims.” Consequently, he added, “to use the world I came from would mean that what I wrote would look to be very like the fantasy or day-dream narratives of best-sellerdom.”⁴³ Yet in spite of his yearning to achieve literary recognition, Vidal chose to enter the field of the best seller in a bid for money. He had earned little more than \$2000 for each of his first six novels, excepting *The City and the Pillar*, which over three years had grossed \$9000. “With the exception of a smash bestseller of the sort that stayed at the top for a long time,” Fred Kaplan wrote of the post-war book trade, “the novel was not a paying proposition.”⁴⁴ Vidal considered writing both for Hollywood and television, but decided that he would first write a pulp novel. This medium, to which he contributed five books between 1950 and 1954, released him from the introspection of his preceding work. This in turn enabled him to make use of the social and

⁴² *Judgement*, 146.

⁴³ *SH*, 78.

⁴⁴ Kaplan, *Vidal*, 314.

political background he would subsequently perceive as a legitimate resource in his work as a writer.

In the summer of 1950 Vidal wrote *A Star's Progress* (1951), to be published under the pseudonym Katherine Everard.⁴⁵ The plot charts the rise and fall of Mexican-born Hollywood film-star Graziella Serrano. The work was constrained by the medium, and "[t]hroughout," Fred Kaplan accordingly wrote, "convention and public morality press hard on the narrative."⁴⁶ In the end Serrano has to pay for her promiscuous lifestyle and commits suicide. Although Vidal here drew on his knowledge of the cinema, it would not be until *Washington, D.C.* (1967) and *Myra Breckinridge* (1968) that he would consider it as a political resource. Nevertheless, this first experiment in the best-seller form led him to use his background and interests to greater effect in the ensuing two works, the Edgar Box mysteries *Death in the Fifth Position* (1952) and *Death Before Bedtime* (1953). His knowledge of the American political system is actively at work in these books. In the best seller format moreover, Vidal is not caught up with the idea of character. Instead, history, or, rather, historical circumstance, moves centre stage: in *Death in the Fifth Position* he writes about the anti-Communist witch-hunts of the early 1950s, and in *Death Before Bedtime* the subject is political corruption. This use of his background as a political resource and the concurrent end of the golden age forecast Vidal's change of direction as a writer. The best seller was, in a sense, a training ground for his move away from the so-called serious fiction of the 1940s toward his own idiosyncratic work.

⁴⁵ Vidal's authorship of this book was not revealed until the publication of the Kaplan biography. There is certainly no mss in the archive.

⁴⁶ Kaplan, *Vidal*, 314.

Vidal published three novels under the Edgar Box pseudonym. The first, *Death in the Fifth Position*, was written in the summer of 1951. The second, *Death Before Bedtime*, was written in the early months of 1953, when Vidal was also at work on the first draft of *Messiah*. The third, *Death Likes It Hot* (1954) was written later that same year.⁴⁷ The medium of the detective story had been suggested by Victor Weybright, the founder of the paperback house New English Library. The novels of Mickey Spillane had proved a success for the Library, and Weybright suggested that Vidal balance the “lowbrow” Spillane with a series of “elegant” mysteries.⁴⁸ Spillane’s *One Lonely Night* was a 1951 best seller. Its detective, Mike Hammer, was depicted as a lone hero who endorsed the murder of Communists, whom he describes as “red sons-of-bitches who should have died long ago.”⁴⁹ As Eric F. Goldman observed, this “tough-guy certainty that he was solving the world’s problems by bludgeoning Communists” certainly echoed the thinking of the day.⁵⁰ In the first of the Edgar Box series, *Death in the Fifth Position*, Vidal balanced the Spillane approach to the question of Communist subversion in a more reasoned manner.

The threat to the very idea of America from the increasing social and political trend toward conformity underwrites the plot of *Death in the Fifth Position*. The novel is narrated by a young publicist, Peter Sargeant, who is under employ to counter accusations that the choreographer of the Grand St. Petersburg ballet, Jed Wilbur, is a Communist.⁵¹ In a telegram from the Veterans Committee, the director of the House is instructed, “IN A TRUE DEMOCRACY THERE IS NO PLACE FOR SERIOUS DIFFERENCE OF OPINION ON GREAT ISSUES,” and that they will therefore

⁴⁷ *Death Likes it Hot*, written after *Messiah* was completed, concerns the upper-class social scene. The narrative does not touch on definite political issues and so I have not written about it here.

⁴⁸ *Palimpsest*, 248.

⁴⁹ Cited in Eric F. Goldman, *The Crucial Decade—And After* (1960), 212.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ In the late 40s Vidal took ballet classes “as physical therapy” for his arthritic knee, and spent time in a world he would use as background here. *Palimpsest*, 147.

picket the ballet until Wilbur is dismissed.⁵² The Committee is a constant presence throughout the investigation into the ensuing murder of the American ballerina Ella Sutton, who was killed when a cable which suspended her thirty feet in the air broke. Along with the *Journal-American* they assume the murder is the result of a Communist plot.⁵³ From the accusations of Communism levelled at a Russian ballet company down to the fact that, when she falls to her death, Sutton lands in the fifth position, the tone of the narrative is somewhat comic. Nevertheless, in what would be characteristic of Vidal's later satirical works, the greater political significance of the absurd Veterans Committee is serious.

The antics of the Veterans Committee are used to demonstrate the political dangers of the trend toward conformity. As a result of the social and political instability engendered by the post-war empire there was, as David Caute wrote in *The Great Fear*, "an artificial straining for social cohesion and national unity." Political opportunists rode to success on this instability for they offered "the chance of being taken for a good American simply by demonstrating a gut hatred for the Commies."⁵⁴ Thus, the Committee states, "TO PROTECT OUR AMERICAN WAY," there is no place for "THE SUBVERSIVE WORK OF ARTISTS."⁵⁵ This was not a question of art nor, indeed, ideology, but of the exploitation of fear at a fractious time. Hitherto, as Eric Goldman noted, the US "had never really departed from certain bedrock assumptions. The business of America was America. It was to get on with this business without dependence on other nations and without interference from them."⁵⁶ The containment policy of the Truman administration was a departure for it was founded on the idea that the Communist enemy would be a constant presence in American affairs. The protracted war against Communist expansion into Korea,

⁵² *Death in the Fifth Position*, 1952 (London, 1982), 7.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 34-35.

⁵⁴ David Caute, *The Great Fear* (London, 1978), 21.

⁵⁵ *Fifth Position*, 7.

⁵⁶ Goldman, *Crucial Decade*, 113.

which had started in June 1950, further endorsed the frustrations that arose from this situation. By 1951 anti-Communist hysteria had reached new heights under the leadership of the junior Senator from Wisconsin, Joseph McCarthy. McCarthy tapped into the understanding that the continued frustrations were the result of a conspiracy within the United States. If the American people had to live with Communism outside of the country they could at the very least destroy it within. *Death in the Fifth Position* registers the political implications of the witch-hunts this thinking inspired.

The very structure of the detective story counters the witch-hunt politics of the Veterans Committee. As a publicist turned sleuth Peter Sargeant is forced to consider circuitous possibilities which deny a simple conclusion. Although Sargeant's own investigation suggests the murder is not political, and that it is far more possible artistic temperament is at play, the accusations against Wilbur continue and political issues are therefore unavoidable. At one point Sargeant is accused of being a Communist sympathiser after he told the Committee "it was up to them to prove Wilbur was a Communist." This ridicules the rejection of the basic right that one is innocent until proven guilty. It also ridicules the practice by which an "ex-liberal" could turn informer, "telling what he knows about Communism in the theater," which is then regarded as proof or, at least, as good as proof. Furthermore, as Sargeant suggests to Wilbur, "to knock you off . . . would be really something for them . . . Justify their whole existence."⁵⁷ Nevertheless, in the end, Vidal is still writing in a popular medium. Sargeant discovers that Wilbur is in fact a Communist (the definitive proof is his membership card), and that he had killed Ella Sutton, his wife, for she was using this information to blackmail him. As with the Everard novel, this hoists Vidal or, rather, Box, off a problematic hook. He first satirised the anti-Communist hysteria and then protected himself by allowing that the Veterans

⁵⁷ *Fifth Position*, 108, 115, 141.

Committee was right to suspect Wilbur. It would of course have been difficult to do otherwise in such an age and in such a medium. Yet the book itself saw Vidal move into an area of criticism he would take up with far greater force in *Messiah*.

Vidal started to write *Messiah* on September 12, 1952 and completed it on July 4, 1953. In January 1953 he was also at work on the second Edgar Box mystery, *Death Before Bedtime*, which was thematically concurrent with *Messiah*. The subject of the murder investigation is the hypothetical dictatorship of the murdered Senator, Leander Rhodes. Like *Death in the Fifth Position*, the plot of *Death Before Bedtime* is centred around the possibility that the murder was the result of a political conspiracy. Peter Sargeant, who is again the narrator, is called to Washington, D.C. to orchestrate the publicity campaign for the reactionary Senator Rhodes, who would that week announce his presidential candidacy. Sargeant describes the campaign as “an unscrupulous and desperate effort of one Leander Rhodes to organise the illiberal minority of the country as a party within his party.” His financial backing is moreover “sinister,” but the image Sargeant is to project, as Rhodes’ secretary Rufus Hollister makes clear, is that of “a crusader for Good Government and True-Blue American Ideals.”⁵⁸ Before Sargeant can start work however, Rhodes is killed by an explosive hidden in the fireplace in his study.

The ideals of good government are in Sargeant’s narrative defined in the negative. Rhodes is not interested in ideology but pragmatism. He instructs Sargeant,

Now I have been in this game long enough to know that high ideals are not enough if you want high office; you have to compromise to win, and I want to win and I am willing to compromise with both Labor and the Left Wing, two elements that have never supported me before.

⁵⁸ *Death Before Bedtime*, 1953 (1979), 10, 11.

Sargeant is told this in no uncertain terms because he is the publicist and consequently, as he remarks, "official liar to our society." In this capacity he is able to observe the side of the political process of which Vidal had a good working knowledge. There is moreover no evidence that Rhodes has any ideals as such. His support from "[e]very fascist in the country," and "every witch hunter in public life," in the words of the journalist Walter Langdon, demonstrates little more than that he is prepared to exploit prejudice in order to win. He is dangerous, Langdon argues, because although he could not have won in "a straight election," his supporters could easily orchestrated a crisis to alter that. "I know it sounds very strange and all that, like a South American republic," he follows, "but it *could* happen here."⁵⁹ The clandestine political control which surfaced at the end of *Dark Green, Bright Red* is central to this hypothesis. Through Langdon, Vidal demonstrates how it is possible for a dictator to come to power in a time of widespread social and political instability.

As a politician from an undisclosed state in the Midwest, Rhodes is on one level allied with the Wisconsin Senator, Joe McCarthy. Sargeant uses this geographical fact to comment that although its towns "may be the backbone of the nation . . . they are also the backbone of ignorance, bigotry, and boredom." In his investigations, the New Yorker Sargeant uncovers that the exploitation of such ignorance and bigotry is sustained by a conspiracy between the politician and the industrialist. "This country is run on one set of principles," the weapons manufacturer Richard Pomeroy instructs Sargeant, "while pretending to another." It transpires that Rhodes' friend Pomeroy had profited greatly from World War II, and as a result "got to be quite a power politically."⁶⁰ Pomeroy was in Washington to attain Senatorial approval for a new explosive, the one that killed Rhodes, and is

⁵⁹ Ibid., 17, 72, 43. This echo of the Sinclair Lewis novel *It Can't Happen Here* (1935) is an indication that Vidal had started to reaffirm the 30s heritage of social protest.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 127, 117, 39.

therefore the chief suspect. The point that emerges from Sargeant's investigations into his business affairs is that one has to be an opportunist to be a politician in the current age, and that one has to work with industrial magnates to maintain that power. While this was very much a Populist analysis, it also demonstrated how social and political instability was used in the McCarthy era to undermine the democratic process. In such an age the pragmatic dictator in embryo could disguise himself in democratic rhetoric.

The original title of the novel was *Kill Him in the Shell*, a quotation from Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. The quotation, "And therefore think him as a serpent's egg, Which, hatched, would as his kind grow mischievous, And kill him in the shell," is to be the aim of Langdon's article on Rhodes.⁶¹ The murder achieves this end, and, in light of the quotation, the subject of the dictator is central to the investigation. In the final analysis however, Vidal again hoists himself off a problematic hook by having Sargeant discover that the murder itself is apolitical, and that Rhodes' disgruntled daughter Ellen is responsible. It is nevertheless clear from the narrative that McCarthy and McCarthyism are the objects of satire. Again, the best seller medium was to prove a playground for ideas Vidal would bring to fruition in *Messiah*, the first of his serious works to look beyond the individual and to scrutinise the greater society.

MESSIAH AND THE POWER OF TELEVISION IN THE ANTI-COMMUNIST ERA

Describing his work as a publicist, Peter Sargeant writes that he is part of "that vast conspiracy to dupe the public in which I and my kind are eternally engaged."⁶² His

⁶¹ Ibid., 43; *Julius Caesar*, Act II, Scene I, 32-24.

⁶² *Fifth Position*, 10.

work, in other words, is what enables the politician to exploit the electorate. The social and political significance of such a conspiracy, which is somewhat sidelined by the detective work in the Box novels, is central to *Messiah*. Unlike the first seven, *Messiah* is a novel of social protest. It is in the tradition of *It Can't Happen Here* (1935), Sinclair Lewis' satire on the rise of an all-American dictator. In this, the eighth novel to be published under his own name, Vidal conceived an allegorical representation of the McCarthy era that addressed how a potential dictator could assume power through a calculated use of the newest form of media: television.

Messiah is set in the early 1950s, and is narrated in retrospect by Eugene Luther.⁶³ It describes the rise of the evangelist John Cave, and the establishment of the Caveite religion in the United States. Through his friend Clarissa Lessing, Luther is introduced to Iris Mortimer, from whom he learns of John Cave. Cave is a mortician by trade who preaches that "[d]eath is nothing; literally no thing; and since, demonstrably, an absence of things is good, death which is no thing is good." The sceptical Luther is drawn into the organisation that builds up around Cave. He is employed to afford "a firm historical and intellectual base" to Cave's vision, which, Luther wrote, "ignored all philosophy," for it was not interested in the problems of life but, instead, "death and man's acceptance of it."⁶⁴ The organisation is created to disseminate Cave's Word. The success of this venture is dependent on the singular power of television.

"Television, ultimately, was the key," Luther recalls, for it was not the word itself but Cave's delivery of the word that was all important. The result of his weekly half-hour sermon was that millions witnessed "the creation of their own secret anxieties and doubts, a central man." Through television, Cave, whom Luther

⁶³ Vidal was baptised Eugene Luther Gore Vidal.

⁶⁴ *Messiah*, 1954 (London, 1993), 67, 76, 98.

believed to be “a natural hypnotist,” is able to assuage the social and political instability of mid-century. Cavesword is then turned into a religion through the work of the publicist Paul Himmell. Luther opposed such organisation on the grounds that “secondary considerations will obscure the point.” The resulting conflict forces the organisation into crisis. In response to the introduction of Cavesway, which enables a person to commit suicide painlessly and in comfortable surroundings, Luther rebels. He states that Cave’s “great work” was to remove the fear of death.⁶⁵ To institute Cavesway he would therefore have to set an example and die by his own hand. When Cave chooses not to die he is shot by Himmell’s associate, the Jungian psychologist Dr. Stokharin. When Himmell fails to gain control in the resulting power struggle he takes Cavesway, which has now become central to the doctrine. Iris Mortimer assumes control of Caveite, Inc. and Luther is forced into retreat. The teachings of Cave are then obscured by new rhetoric and Cavesword becomes the official religion of the Western world.

Eugene Luther is the first of Vidal’s central characters to be a political insider. From his position as a board member of Caveite, Inc., and in his capacity as a writer, he is instrumental to the foundation of Cavesword. As the “one whose polished legend has since become the substantial illusion of a desperate race,” he can therefore state that it is a fiction. Furthermore, Luther is objective in a way that Vidal’s earlier protagonists had not been for he is “effectively withdrawn from all sexuality.”⁶⁶ He is not searching for that elusive sense of completeness with another and is consequently able to look beyond himself. The result, as Alan Cheuse wrote, was that for the first time Vidal “turn[ed] away from conventional narrative romanticism .

⁶⁵ Ibid., 125, 63, 71, 212.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 2, 51-52.

. . . to shine his light on broader matters.”⁶⁷ It was on such terms that *Messiah* broke from his previous work, as Vidal registered on its publication in 1954. He stated that it was “meant to be a warning, unlike most of my books, which are not so specific or precise.”⁶⁸ The warning centres on the overwhelming power of the mass media in an age marked by a pervasive anxiety. The character of Luther enabled Vidal to break free of the introspection characteristic of his earlier fiction and to write as an historian of his times.

The first chapter of *Messiah* is an historical reading of America at mid-century. It meditates on the social and political reasons for the fictional rise of John Cave, and for the object of the allegory, the McCarthy era. “The first dozen years after the second of the modern wars,” Luther writes, were “a time of divination” in which “[n]ot a day passed but that some omen or portent was remarked by an anxious race, suspecting war.” Unexplained phenomena such as UFO sightings exercised a “profound effect” on a “people who, despite their emphatic materialism, were as easily shattered by the unexpected as their ancestors.”⁶⁹ The post-war era was undeniably an age of anxiety. As Eric Goldman wrote, “[a] nation accustomed to the categorical yes and no, to war or peace and prosperity or depression, found itself in the nagging realm of maybe.”⁷⁰ As a result of this insecure age, Luther continues, “[t]he body politic was more than usually upset by signs of nonconformity.” For the intellectuals, he explains, this inaugurated an age in which they “rejected the idea of the reflective mind, arguing that since both logic and science had failed to establish the first cause of the universe or . . . humanity’s significance, only the emotions could reveal . . . the key to meaning.”⁷¹ Throughout *Messiah*, Vidal demonstrates that

⁶⁷ Alan Cheuse, ‘A Note on Vidal’s *Messiah*,’ *Writer Against the Grain*, ed. Jay Parini (London, 1992), 105.

⁶⁸ Interview, Rochelle Girson, ‘This Week’s Personality,’ *Ottawa Citizen*, May 22, 1954.

⁶⁹ *Messiah*, 3-4, 6.

⁷⁰ Goldman, *Crucial Decade*, 14.

⁷¹ *Messiah*, 8, 10.

to prioritise the emotional over the rational is to undermine the democratic system and prepare the way for a new social and political authority. In an age when the intellectual retreated from social criticism, when at the height of McCarthyism a critic such as Diana Trilling could write “the idea that America is a terror-stricken country in the grip of hysteria is a Communist inspired idea,” Vidal argued that a society so organised was undefended against the rise of a dictator.⁷²

For Vidal, the rejection of authority was concurrent with the promise of the golden age. The breakdown of “the old authority of the church, of settled Puritan morality” he wrote, created an opportunity to write “without wasting one’s substance in political or social opposition.” His vision of the new imperium was one in which “there is no reality for man except in relations with his own kind.”⁷³ Nevertheless, in *Messiah* Eugene Luther proposes that the intellectual establishment endorsed the creation of a new authority precisely because it had renounced social and political opposition. To accept “that art’s single function was the fullest expression of a private vision,” he states, enabled one to experience an emotional and psychological catharsis that left in its wake “a boredom which . . . could be dispelled only by faith.”⁷⁴ This hunger for faith was in fact prevalent in the post-war era. In 1946, the Federal Council of Churches of Christ declared that “at the present time all signs . . . lead to one conclusion. Americans are going back to God.” By 1952 this had become a national phenomenon.⁷⁵ Vidal argued that such a trend represented a political danger, for “certitude brings with it intolerance, and intolerance brings with it murder. Everything does that thinks it has an answer which must be imposed on

⁷² Cited in Cate, *Great Fear*, 53. Trilling wrote this in August 1952. See also notes 10-13. In the post-war years moreover, the intellectual in politics was demonised. An opportunist such as McCarthy exploited this. Vidal does not address this in *Messiah*.

⁷³ ‘Writers and Critics of the 1940s,’ *US*, 15. (*New World Writing* # 4, 1953.) This is the published version of a lecture Vidal had worked on since 1948. See ‘Introduction,’ note 21. That it was published at the time Vidal was writing *Messiah* suggests that while he questioned them, he was not yet free of his earlier critical standards.

⁷⁴ *Messiah*, 8, 9.

⁷⁵ Cited, Goldman, *Crucial Decade*, 43.

other people.”⁷⁶ *Messiah* is consequently a fictional demonstration of Vidal’s understanding that an absolute, whether it be religious or political, was a threat to the anti-absolutism of American exceptionalism for it offered one way that would repress all others.

Newspaper reviews are often interesting for the extent to which they echo ideas predominant at the time of publication. The primary criticism levelled at *Messiah* was that it did not sufficiently concern itself with the victims of the tremendous deception achieved by Cavesword. In the Sunday *New York Times*, Maxwell Geismar wrote that unlike satirists such as Aldous Huxley and George Orwell, Vidal “is at home only in a completely artificial world of isolated protagonists and vain lives.” This reflected, he continued, a “fundamental lack of concern for both people and genuine social values.” As a result “the narrative moves rather in the direction of juvenile fantasy than of genuine satire.”⁷⁷ The reviewer for the *New York Herald-Tribune* was far closer to the mark when he observed that *Messiah* “is a mordant, cleverly conceived account of the credulity of the masses and the genius of their exploiters.” He nonetheless concluded that as satire it is “diverting rather than affecting” because Vidal is “[u]nconcerned with the many who are victims of false gods.”⁷⁸ The Memphis *Press-Scimitar* reviewer rejected the very premise on the grounds that “I don’t believe the people of the United States have shown themselves to be so easily led.”⁷⁹ In writing about those who govern rather than those who are governed, Vidal broke not only with the literary tradition of the time, but the idea of democracy which that tradition upheld. *Messiah* challenged the rhetoric that sustained the anti-Communist crusade and, moreover, did not differentiate the New

⁷⁶ Girson, ‘This Week’s Personality.’

⁷⁷ Maxwell Geismar, ‘Deadly Altar,’ *NYT Book Review*, April 25, 1954, 4.

⁷⁸ Milton Rugoff, ‘One Very Dark Look Ahead,’ *New York Herald-Tribune*, April 26, 1954.

⁷⁹ Robert Richards, ‘Now Novelist Warns Us Of Religious Blitz: But Isn’t H-Bomb Threat Enough,’ *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, May 10, 1954.

World from the totalitarian politics of the Old. The reviewers objected to it on the grounds that Vidal did not represent the people, and the warning therefore remained unseen.

Messiah is a fictional meditation on the extent to which personal liberty was under threat in an age marked by social and political instability. What Geismar for one did not see is that Vidal is concerned with the extent to which the perpetrators of his fictional deception are vain, and, by definition, self-seeking, in order to demonstrate their indifference to social values. The social value Vidal is interested in is that threatened by an insecure populace under the spell of a demagogue. As Alexis de Tocqueville wrote, in times of social change the “passion” for equality “swells to the height of fury,” and overrides the passion for liberty.⁸⁰ In the insecure age Luther describes in the preface to his narrative, the victim is not just the people as a whole but the idea of the exceptional state. In *Messiah*, Vidal describes a new, American type of totalitarianism. It is the rhetoric of the free society rather than the point of the gun that sustains Cavesword. The religion is a success because it is based on “what the people want to hear” and *responds* to the needs of an insecure mass. “Our whole power is that people come to us, to Cave, voluntarily,” Paul Himmell states, “because they feel here, at last, is the answer.”⁸¹ Vidal depicts this as more insidious than the threat from either the Fascist or Communist state because the machinery of state control is concealed, and the word is maintained not through fear but through propaganda which promised liberation from fear. Liberty is therein crushed by the demand for equality.

Messiah, furthermore, engages with two historical trends predominant at the beginning of the 1950s which, through the use of propaganda, redefined the

⁸⁰ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* 1835 (1956), 190, 191.

⁸¹ *Messiah*, 20, 129, 131.

American way of life. The first is the sense of frustration that resulted from the new empire: in 1948 the negotiations over the division of Germany led Stalin to block access to Berlin; in September 1949 the Soviet Union had successfully developed the atom bomb, while in the same month the government in China, which had long been supported by the United States, fell to Communism. This series of events were a challenge to what David Caute described as the “messianic image” America had of “its own mission in the world.”⁸² As a consequence of this manufactured image, the American people, as Godfrey Hodgson wrote in *America In Our Time*, “lacked a sense of what was historically possible,” and in response to the inventory of frustrations tended “to blame the government for problems that it had neither caused nor could reasonably be expected to resolve.” The product of this wide-ranging hubris, the anti-Communist crusade of Senator McCarthy, is the second historical trend addressed. This crusade, this syllogism, as Hodgson described it, was a consequence of an insecure age: “America is so powerful. Yet things are not going as we want them to. *Ergo*, we are being betrayed.”⁸³ The witch-hunts inspired by political opportunists such as McCarthy gave form to the anti-Communist crusade. The meaning of this absolute, which had redefined American society under the aegis of the Cold War, is the object of the allegorical *Messiah*.

The technological change that enabled this political transformation was television. In the post-war economic boom this former novelty entered the mainstream. According to the Nielsen ratings system, January 1946 was the first time more televisions than radios were operating during prime time (the evening hours between six and nine.)⁸⁴ It was from these, the early days of the Cold War, that television was used to disseminate the anti-Communist message. “As the United States entered the Cold

⁸² Caute, *Great Fear*, 21-22.

⁸³ Godfrey Hodgson, *America In Our Time* (1976), 38, 37.

⁸⁴ David Halberstam, *The Powers That Be* (1979), 146.

War,” J. Fred MacDonald wrote in *Television and the Red Menace*, “it did so in an atmosphere of anti-Communist fear that gained persuasive popular expression in TV.” From drama to the news to the talk show, television presented an “oversimplified” picture of the “honest, selfless United States . . . forced to defend the free world against the barbarous onslaught of Communism.”⁸⁵ Furthermore, in the eighteen months before September 1952, when Vidal started to write *Messiah*, the hegemony of television as an effective medium for propaganda had started to change the democratic process itself.

In March 1951 the New York proceedings of the Special Committee to Investigate Organised Crime in Interstate Commerce, chaired by the Tennessee Senator Estes Kefauver, was broadcast as a public service. The case proved sensational enough to draw an estimated 30 million viewers and become “the nation’s first TV spectacular.” As a result the hearings made the Democrat Kefauver.⁸⁶ In January 1952 the junior Senator from California, Richard Nixon, furthered the political significance of this achievement. The Republican Nixon, who had established his political name by hounding alleged Communists under the aegis of the House Un-American Activities Committee, was reported to have a slush fund raised by California businessmen to aid his bid for the vice-presidency. In a half-hour television address he countered accusations of corruption and explained that “[e]very penny of it was used to pay for political expenses that I did not think should be charged to the taxpayers,” and added that “no contributor . . . has ever received any [special] consideration.”⁸⁷ In front of an audience of 58 million Nixon presented himself as an average man who had been much maligned. “To most,” Herbert S. Parmet wrote, “he was a figure from a Frank Capra movie, a Mr. Smith who had gone to Washington and found himself contending with all the problems that the Mr.

⁸⁵ J. Fred MacDonald, *Television and the Red Menace* (1985), 12.

⁸⁶ Goldman, *Crucial Decade*, 194, 198.

⁸⁷ Cited in Stephen Ambrose, *Nixon: The Education of a Politician* (1987), 288.

Smiths of America could recognize.”⁸⁸ Television therein changed the nature of politics for it focused on the individual over and above the political platform. It “made the personality of the candidate central,” as Theodore White wrote in *America In Search of Itself*, and as a result, Vidal argued in *Messiah*, was the perfect medium through which to establish a dictator.⁸⁹

Throughout *Messiah* Vidal maintained that television would enable the embryonic dictator to use the rhetoric of democracy in order to attain power because of the extent to which it had changed the nature of American society. Luther writes that in the years before television, Hollywood cinema was the medium through which the audience was made “homogenous by a common passion.” It was, he recalls, a wholly different time, an era of gods and goddesses who “floated to earth in public dreams, suggesting a brave and perfect world where love reigned and only the wicked died.” The “home altar” of television, on the other hand, “did not enrapture, nor possess dreams or shape days with longing and with secret imaginings.” Television characterised the post-war suburban life, in which “silent families . . . gathered in after-dinner solemnity before television sets, absorbed by the spectacle of blurred gray figures telling jokes.”⁹⁰ It did not transcend everyday life in the way the mythical cinema had but, instead, became an integral part of it.

It is Luther’s argument that television was heir to the comedy reviews and quiz shows of radio days rather than the social idealism of Hollywood. The era of Depression and war, which Vidal’s heroine Myra Breckinridge would describe as “the last moment in human history when it was possible to possess a total commitment to something outside of oneself,” was a time when social and political

⁸⁸ Herbert S. Parmet, *Richard Nixon and his America* (Boston, 1990), 246.

⁸⁹ Theodore H. White, *America in Search of Itself: The Making of the President, 1956-1980* (1982), 167.

⁹⁰ *Messiah*, 45-46, 56.

idealism was conceivable.⁹¹ With the advent of television, Luther argued, the idealism of American society was reduced to the confines of the twenty-one inch screen. Ideas were consequently no longer *as* important, he maintained, thus “few ever considered the meaning” of the presidential directive “[i]n a true democracy there is no place for a serious difference of opinion on great issues.”⁹² The revered radio journalist Ed Murrow had in fact reached the same conclusion when he wrote that television was a medium more suited to entertainment than to the conveyance of information. With its emphasis on the visual image over the content of the news report, he concluded “I cannot see that television news will become more than a supplement to the daily newspaper.”⁹³ In *Messiah*, the first of Vidal’s works to reach toward the greater question of politics and the representation of politics in the media, Luther warns that, consequently, “words are never a familiar province to the great mass which prefers recognizable pictures to even the most apposite prose.”⁹⁴ The danger of television was that if words were not subject to analysis, a demagogue such as McCarthy could use the rhetoric of political independence to inaugurate tyranny.

The rise of Cavesword is a demonstration of this thesis. The success of Cave’s message, Luther explains, is dependent on its being heard. In the first television broadcast moreover, Luther is struck primarily by his awareness that the television screen furnished Cave with an additional authority. This is the key to the satire. It was the stance rather than the words that ensured its success. The medium of television therefore gave Cave an authority which made his words seem, “in short, the truth.” What Cave offered in an age of social and political instability, Luther recalls, was “to be no longer an observer, a remote intelligence,” but, instead, to be

⁹¹ Myra Breckinridge (Boston, 1968), 59.

⁹² *Messiah*, 58.

⁹³ Cited in Joseph E. Persico, *Edward R. Murrow*, 1988 (1997), 295.

⁹⁴ *Messiah*, 58.

“part of a whole.” His television audience are consequently given strength in this unity and witness “the creation of their own secrets and anxieties and doubts, a central man.” In a profoundly anti-intellectual age moreover, Cave does not offer a challenge because “[w]hat I know they know,” although “most of them probably would not have thought it out until I came along and made it all clear.”⁹⁵ Cave, like McCarthy, only tells what his audience are prepared to hear. Through television the dictator could therefore take control and end liberty through the rhetoric of equality.

It was equality, David Caute wrote, that McCarthy promised a people unsettled by the Cold War, for he “treated Communism as a perversion to which no man was condemned by birth, only by choice.” As a result he “offered every American, however precarious his ancestry, the chance of being taken for a good American, simply by demonstrating a gut hatred for Commies.”⁹⁶ At the start, McCarthy proved a dextrous performer in front of the television camera. He “skillfully manipulated half-truths and misrepresented facts,” J. Fred MacDonald wrote.

He distorted history by ignoring political context and careful analysis. He pounded the lectern authoritatively, cited documents, and sounded sure of what he was saying. With little or no convincing rebuttal to his opinions, viewers were left ill-equipped to doubt McCarthy.⁹⁷

The words, which tended to contradict each other with each successive appearance, were not as important as the stance. Thus did Vidal describe television as the ideal medium for the demagogue. “The thought that 70 million people at the same time can watch and be taken in by him,” he said of McCarthy, “is frightening. And how else can a messiah be launched except by television?”⁹⁸

⁹⁵ Ibid., 120, 61, 125, 67.

⁹⁶ Caute, *Great Fear*, 21.

⁹⁷ MacDonald, *Television*, 50.

⁹⁸ Girson, ‘This Week’s Personality.’

"After *The City and the Pillar*," Vidal stated, the next event to radicalise him "was Joe McCarthy—watching the blacklist in action."⁹⁹ In response to the political menace of anti-Communism, which had for one made his good friend John LaTouche unemployable, he returned to the tradition of social and political protest that had flourished in the 1930s.¹⁰⁰ There is a clear link between *Messiah* and Sinclair Lewis' *It Can't Happen Here*. The instability to which Luther attributes the rise of Cavesword is concurrent with that described by Lewis. The year his dictator, Senator Buzz Windrip, rose to power was one in which

the electorate hungered for frisky emotions, for the peppery sensations associated, usually, not with monetary systems and taxation rates but with . . . all the primitive sensations which they thought they found in the screaming of Buzz Windrip.

Like Windrip (and Senator Leander Rhodes in *Death Before Bedtime*) John Cave is dependent on the exploitation of fear and prejudice to establish his religion. This is a prerequisite in the rise of a demagogue. As Lewis' newspaper editor Doremus Jessup states, "there's no country in the world that can get as hysterical—yes, or more obsequious!—than America." After a list of preceding hysteria, ranging from the wartime censorship to Prohibition, Jessup asks rhetorically, "where in history has there ever been a people so ripe for dictatorship as ours?" There are moreover striking relations between Windrip, Cave, and McCarthy. "There was no more overwhelming actor on the stage, in the motion pictures, or even in the pulpit," Lewis writes of Windrip. He was "the Common Man magnified twenty times by his oratory, so that while the other Commoners could understand his every purpose . . . they saw him towering above them, and they raised their hands to him in worship."¹⁰¹ There is one other striking relation to Cave in particular. The success of Cave was in the delivery of words that were, on the whole, forgotten after the fact.

⁹⁹ Jon Wiener, 'The Scholar Squirrels and the National Security State: An Interview with Gore Vidal,' *Radical History Review* 44 (1989), 117.

¹⁰⁰ Kaplan, *Vidal*, 376.

¹⁰¹ Sinclair Lewis, *It Can't Happen Here*, 1935 (1961), 99-100, 34-35, 86-87.

Without the presence of Cave, Luther writes, his words “would not stand up” to observation.¹⁰² Doremus Jessup likewise “had been told that under the spell” of his oratory “you thought Windrip was Plato, but that on the way home you could not remember anything he had said.”¹⁰³ It was not the words but the stand that made the greatest impact, and it was the stand rather than the words that inaugurated the dictatorships of Cave and Windrip under the guise of democracy, of the common man rising up against the oppressor.

Yet whereas the fictional Buzz Windrip came to power in the 1930s depression, Cave (and McCarthy) came to power in a more affluent age. McCarthy preyed on the post-war fear that prosperity would end, as it had done at the end of the 1920s. What Cave has in such an age is the advertising machinery of the consumer society. Under the direction of Paul Himmell, Cave is sold like a product. First, interest is created through several planted news stories, and Luther’s introduction is published. Second, Cave appears weekly on television, for “once that gets started we’re in.” “[I]n Paul’s hands,” Luther writes, the enterprise “resembled, more often than not, a cynical commercial venture.”¹⁰⁴ Paul Himmell, like his biblical namesake, is “the organizational genius who creates an institution . . . from Cave’s casual utterances,” as Theodore Ziolkowski wrote.¹⁰⁵ He founds the religion, Cavesword, on a detailed breakdown of the public response commissioned “to get the general reaction, to find out what it is people most want to hear.” In response to Cave’s message the public demands a corresponding system of directives which form the basis of Cavesword. This is the power of the advertising machine: the indeterminate demand for security is answered by the product, Cave; from the public response a religion is founded on the specific exploitation of fear as outlined by the various

¹⁰² *Messiah*, 143.

¹⁰³ Lewis, *It Can’t Happen Here*, 86.

¹⁰⁴ *Messiah*, 82, 155.

¹⁰⁵ Theodore Ziolkowski, *Fictional Transfigurations of Jesus* (Princeton, 1972), 253.

demands made for guidance; this is then returned to the public as truth, or Truth. This is where Vidal differs from Orwell and Huxley and is more in the tradition of Sinclair Lewis: the public are far more complicit in the creation of this totalitarian state.

Another point on which *Messiah* follows Lewis is concurrent with Peter Sargeant's discovery in *Death Before Bedtime* that it is impossible for a dictator to rise without the backing of the manufacturing aristocracy. In *It Can't Happen Here*, Buzz Windrip elicits support from the industrialists on the grounds that, as the businessman Frank Tasborough informs Doremus Jessup, "Jew Communists and Jew financiers [are] plotting together to run the country . . . to tell men like *me* how to run our business."¹⁰⁶ In *Messiah*, Vidal uses his Populist heritage to show that for any venture to work in the modern capitalist society it is necessary to have such support. Cave is first supported by a group of California millionaires. This enables Caveite, Inc. to incorporate and to buy the necessary air time. Himmell reports that after the first broadcast they had received eleven offers of sponsorship. Months later Luther narrates that several West Coast industrialists owned shares in Caveite Inc., and that the "main revenue of the company now came from the sponsor of Cave's television show."¹⁰⁷ It may be Cavesword that changes the philosophical structure of American society, but the ownership of the country, the manufacturing aristocracy, remains the same. It is this conclusion that would found Vidal's later understanding of the Cold War era: the manufacturing class are not so much concerned with the philosophical questions on which the country is run but that which enables them to make money. The mass media are consequently a tool through which the populace can be exploited and such power can be maintained.

¹⁰⁶ Lewis, *It Can't Happen Here*, 33.

¹⁰⁷ *Messiah*, 128, 149.

At the centre of the allegory is the philosophical question of death. It is the one issue that more than any other signifies Vidal's understanding of how the golden age had been undone in the McCarthy era. The question is represented by a fundamental opposition between Luther and Cave. Luther is drawn in because he discerns in Cave the promise that

life will be wonderful when men no longer fear dying. When the last superstitions are thrown out and we meet death with the same equanimity that we have met life. No longer will children's minds be twisted by evil gods whose fantastic origin is in those barbaric tribes who feared death and light, who feared life. That's it: life is the villain to those who preach reward in death.

Yet whereas Luther is interested in the philosophical possibility that one could found a better society on Cave's teaching, Cave is unconcerned with the problems of life. "Each time I said 'life,' " Luther writes, "he said 'death.' " ¹⁰⁸ The conflict between Luther and Cave brings the social and political impact of the McCarthy era into focus. The allegorical point is that the new religion of anti-Communism spelled an end to the golden age for it was founded on conformity. This is a point on which Vidal engages with Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932). "[N]o offence is so heinous as unorthodoxy of behaviour" the Director instructs Bernard, the rebel in embryo. "Unorthodoxy threatens more than the life of a mere individual; it strikes at Society itself." ¹⁰⁹ The result of such conformity is that "the populace," as Vidal later wrote of the Old World, "were as so many bees to serve the sovereign in her hive." ¹¹⁰ The United States was founded as an exception to this, but McCarthyism, like the fictional religion Cavesword, took advantage of fear and returned to the security of tribalism. The allegorical point of *Messiah* is that absolutism of this sort threatened the idea of America, and prescribed a death in life.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 108, 109.

¹⁰⁹ Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World*, 1932 (London, 1955), 120.

¹¹⁰ *The American Presidency* (Chicago, 1998), 10.

In this critique of the McCarthy era Vidal invoked the Populist opposition to the centralised state. Luther is from the start opposed to organisation on the grounds that “secondary considerations will obscure the point.” In the post-war, post-New Deal era, this is not possible, in the words of Iris Mortimer, because of the temperament of the people. “People are used to tyranny,” she instructs Luther. “They expect governments to demand their souls, and they have given up decisions on many levels for love of security.” The organisation of Cavesword is consequently founded not on the eighteenth century conception of exceptionalism but on institutionalised tyranny. To create a religion a series of Caveite centres are established. Each is presided over by a staff of analysts indoctrinated in Cavesword, which consist of Cave’s television broadcasts and texts written by Luther. Each centre holds weekly meetings presided over by a disciple who was, “in the opinion of the directors, equal to the task of representing Cave and his word.” Like his anti-New Deal grandfather, Vidal is opposed to the planned society such as that described in *It Can’t Happen Here*, *Brave New World* and *1984* (1948) on the grounds that tyranny is inevitable. T.P. Gore had argued that the Constitution “solved the problem” of “how to reconcile power and freedom, how to harmonize government and liberty,” and Gore Vidal had echoed this in the allegorical *Messiah*.¹¹¹ The development of Cavesword from a cult to a religion produces a structure Luther describes as “Byzantine.”¹¹² This is a parable of the American journey from republic to empire, from an agrarian society founded on self-sufficiency to an industrial machine that governed the world under the edict of anti-Communism. It described the absolutism which Vidal believed spelled an end to the golden age.

¹¹¹ T.P. Gore, ‘Americanism,’ 2, GVC, Box 132, Folder 4.

¹¹² *Messiah*, 71, 136, 154, 159.

It is only at the end of his narrative that Luther understands the meaning of the enterprise. In Luxor, Egypt, where he had fled after Iris Mortimer assumed control of the organisation, Luther is confronted by a Caveite Communicator, Bill Butler. Fifty years after he had first become involved with Cavesword, Luther discovers that much of the Testament had been altered. When Butler gives him a new copy he also discovers that his name had been deleted, that he had been written out of history. Yet what Luther reveals at the end is that Cave's dying words, whispered to Iris Mortimer, were "Gene was right." Nevertheless, it is Mortimer who takes over the organisation after it is reported that Cave had taken his own life. She enables the institution of Cavesway. On learning of Cave's last words only hours before his exile, Luther writes, "I remember looking at her with shock, waiting for her to continue, to make some apology for her reckless falsification of Cave's life and death." In describing his first meeting with Mortimer moreover, Luther recalls that he should not have mistrusted her because she is a Midwesterner, a people he believed "curiously hostile to freedom . . . who distrusted ideas, who feared the fine with the primitive intensity of implacable ignorance." In the end it transpires that she is such an enemy. If the danger is to come, as Vidal had concluded in *Death Before Bedtime*, it is to come from the Midwest. What Luther realises from all this is that "I was he whom the world awaited. I was that figure, that messiah whose work might have been the world's delight and liberation."¹¹³ Luther, like Vidal, advocated a future founded on the exceptionalist idea, and yet he is written out of history by forces that resisted it. What he realises is that it should not have been Cave who was the central man but himself.

Throughout *Messiah*, Vidal endorsed Populist teachings and yet does not renounce the idea of the central man inherited from the Hollywood cinema of the 1930s. Eugene Luther is drawn to Cave for here was the central man who promised

¹¹³ Ibid., 243, 20, 244.

to free him from his own social, political and personal anxieties. In this he is no different from Cave's audience. At the end of the narrative moreover, the central man, the messiah, could still provide such an answer in the form of Luther rather than Cave. Cave is the simple man, the anti-intellectual who, like McCarthy, exploited the people. In concluding *Messiah*, Vidal turned to the educated man, to Luther, as he would in the 1960 election turn to John F. Kennedy, as the true central man. The sense of completeness with another which haunted the earlier novels was thus transferred from the personal to the social and political stage.

In his rebirth as a satirist in *Messiah*, Vidal nevertheless echoes the teachings of T.P. Gore, of the importance of the individual within the social system, and why a limited government was essential to sustain that. It is an act of historical revisionism, a meditation on the McCarthy era outwith the rhetoric that sustained it. In this Vidal makes use of the heritage of the Farmer's Alliance lecturing system, whose revisionism was an attempt to warn the American people of the association between the business interests, the media, and the government "lest they be seduced into accepting rule by a two-party capitalist elite and calling it democracy."¹¹⁴ In addition, while *Messiah* is a reading of the end of the golden age under the weight of McCarthyism and the war in Korea, it is also an assessment of what the exceptional empire could achieve. Released from the introspection of his earlier work Vidal is able to discern that possibility in a far clearer way. The idea of the exceptional society he described in *The City and the Pillar* reaches fruition when it is released from the individual concerns of its protagonist, Jim Willard. At the age of twenty-seven, Vidal wrote the first of the works that would come to define his political stand.

¹¹⁴ Lawrence Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise* (1976), 354.

Yet in this, his first great political statement, Vidal had not fully worked out what his Populist education would mean to him as a writer. While he drew on this heritage to write about the end of the golden age, and registers that an imperial bureaucracy was by its very nature prey to tyranny, he cites television as the principal reason for its demise. In the social and political instability of the early 1950s, television spelled an end to the dream of an empire founded on American exceptionalism. It also spelled an end to literature as the medium through which the promise of the post-war era could be defined. Nevertheless, in his work over the next decade Vidal would still cling to the idea of a golden age, and the idea of the central man. He would therefore be forced to reassess his heritage and what it would mean to his literary and political ambitions in the time of the Cold War.

The New Frontier, and the Promise of the Golden Age Revived

By the time *Messiah* was published in 1954, Gore Vidal had started to write for television, and would not publish another novel, *Julian*, until 1964. The social and political temperament of the McCarthy era had turned him into a satirist, and he continued in that vein under the presidency of Dwight Eisenhower. In the occasional television drama, and throughout his essay writing, he warned that the democratic system had been undermined by the anti-intellectual Eisenhower years. The “shift of verb” from “I think” to “I feel” prevalent in popular culture, Vidal wrote in 1959, “unconsciously is to eschew mind and take cover in the cozier, more democratic world of feeling.”¹ As a satirist, he proposed that without the protection of thought, the idea of equality was hostile to the principle of liberty.

The emergence of John F. Kennedy as a serious presidential candidate in 1960 represented for Vidal the promise of the golden age revived. The rhetoric of the New Frontier that informed Kennedy’s campaign was built on the work of a think tank which included the noted historians Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. and Allan Nevins.² This rhetoric pledged a strong ruler bound to the principle of exceptionalism over and above the tide of public opinion. In *Messiah*, Vidal had reached the conclusion that an imperial bureaucracy was by its very nature prey to

¹ ‘Love Love Love,’ *US*, 59. (*Partisan Review*, Spring 1959.)

² Nevins, Schlesinger noted, was first involved in the think tank in 1956. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *A Thousand Days* (1965), 35. He wrote a foreword for Kennedy’s *Profiles in Courage* (1956), and edited and introduced the collection of speeches *The Strategy of Peace* (1960). Nevins does not feature highly in books on Camelot yet the value of this a-list historian to Kennedy’s reputation as a legitimate politician cannot be underestimated.

tyranny, and yet in his support of the Kennedy campaign he reaffirmed his post-war imperialism. As far as Vidal understood him, Kennedy was the central man who would ensure the importance of the individual within the greater social system. The idea of American exceptionalism taught by his grandfather, and the idea of a strong leader endorsed by the cinema of the 1930s, would therefore run side by side throughout this period. Vidal believed that power and freedom would be reconciled under the leadership of John F. Kennedy, and that, as a result, the golden age could materialise.

THE POSSIBILITIES OF TELEVISION DRAMA, 1954-1959

Throughout the late 1950s, Vidal maintained that television had spelled an end to the post-war golden age. He reasoned that the prophesied “new era in our letters” had been submerged under a social and political conformity endorsed by television.³ Writing in 1956, he concluded that, as a result of the technical innovations within the mass media, the audience for the novel had disappeared. He insisted that “appalling education combined with clever toys has distracted that large public which found pleasure in prose fictions.” Furthermore, he argued, television undermined the social standing of the novel. Consequently, “our civilization has come full circle: from the Greek mysteries to the plays to the printing press and the novel to television and plays again.”⁴ In 1953, he maintained, Vidal realised “the novel as a popular art form had come to a full halt.”⁵ In order to sustain his writing career, and to make money, he then started to work for television.

³ ‘Visit to a Small Planet,’ *US*, 1160. (*The Reporter*, July 11, 1957.)

⁴ ‘A Note on the Novel,’ *US*, 25. (*NYT*, August 5, 1956.)

⁵ ‘Writing Plays for Television,’ *US*, 1156. (*New World Writing* # 10, 1956.)

In 1949 Vidal thought that writing for television could supplement his work as a novelist. He nevertheless decided to first publish the pseudonymous Katherine Everard novel *A Star's Progress*, to be followed by the three Edgar Box mysteries, and, in June 1953, *Thieves Fall Out*, under the pseudonym Cameron Kay. These works proved less lucrative than Vidal had hoped. Late in 1953 he therefore contacted Harold Franklin, head of television drama at the William Morris Agency. As a result of this association his first television play, *Dark Possession*, was screened by the CBS anthology *Studio One* on February 14, 1954. As a result of his ensuing success in this medium, Vidal foresaw yet another "Golden Age" (as he described in the essay 'Writing Plays for Television') wherein the television dramatist, and not the novelist, would deliberate on the social and possibilities of the time. Moreover, "the dramatic art is particularly satisfying for any writer with a polemical bent; and I am at heart a propagandist, a tremendous hater, a tiresome nag, complacently positive that there is no human problem which could not be solved if people would simply do as I advise."⁶ Television allowed Vidal to voice his opinion on the social and political questions of the 50s through a medium that ensured him a considerable audience.

Throughout the 1950s original television drama was striking because of the social conflict it staged. For instance, in contrast to Herman Wouk's *The Caine Mutiny Court Martial* (November 19, 1955), which appeared to advocate an indiscriminate deference to authority, Vidal in *A Sense of Justice* (February 6, 1955) and Rod Serling in *Patterns* (January 12, 1955), endorsed rebellion against a specious authority figure. The cultural significance of the McCarthy era could thus be analysed and questioned, albeit in the immediate aftermath. Likewise in *Thunder on Sycamore Street* (March 15, 1954), Reginald Rose represented an insecure people as no more than an irrational mob. The play is concerned with the people of a

⁶ Ibid., 1159, 1157-1158.

suburban street who are determined to drive out an ex-convict. "I'm crazy with fear because I don't want to be different," Phyllis Hayes instructs her husband. "I don't want my neighbours looking at us and wondering why we're not like them."⁷ Television drama emerged as an arena for debate on key issues. Vidal was, moreover, not tainted by the blacklist for, as he wrote in 1960, "I had never joined *anything*."⁸ He was thus able to use the television play as an effective arena for the exploration and discussion of ideas.

In *A Sense of Justice*, Vidal again took up the theme of the all-American dictator. The dictator in question, Dennis Leighton, is the owner of a casino in the Midwest town Talisman City, as well as "most of [the] state." Peter Chase, a war veteran, has travelled west from New Hampshire to kill Leighton. He is bored with the repetition of his life after the army, with each day like the last, "doing nothing all over again." To kill Leighton would be "one thing done. One good thing." Chase is an existential hero, a war veteran alienated by the post-war era of conformity who seeks an ideal to fight for, to kill for. Yet when he talks to Leighton he is persuaded against this course of action. "Everyone has a sense of justice," Leighton states, "and in most cases it's self-interest. If they took what you did seriously you'd have them all tumbling against each other like so many dominoes."⁹ Throughout this discussion, Chase is unaware that Leighton is under arrest as a result of investigations into his dealings, and the closing scene is that of Leighton being taken to jail. "The play," Vidal commented, "was written during the last act of the Senator McCarthy drama," which had "reilluminated an ancient debate: should one act directly and kill the serpent in the egg?" In *A Sense of Justice*, Vidal reasons that the law should be observed. Leighton is not murdered but, like McCarthy, his reign of terror is eventually brought

⁷ Reginald Rose, 'Thunder on Sycamore Street,' *Best Television Plays*, ed. Gore Vidal (1956), 55.

⁸ 'HUAC Revisited,' *Rocking the Boat* 1962 (1963), 81. (*Esquire*, December 1961.)

⁹ *A Sense of Justice*, in *Visit to a Small Planet and Other Television Plays* (Boston, 1957), 50, 51, 71, 77.

to an end by due process. Vidal could probably do no other, but indulged himself in an afterword by writing "I rather think now that Chase should have killed Leighton."¹⁰

Visit to a Small Planet, screened on May 8, 1955, established Vidal's reputation as an important playwright. The play is an indictment of the irrational militarism of the Cold War era. A visitor, Kreton, arrives on earth with the aim of starting a war, "for it's the one thing your little race does well." He enters the home of the television commentator Roger Spelding at the end of a broadcast which states that a reported flying object (Kreton's spaceship) is in fact a meteor.¹¹ In his encounter with the Spelding family and the military, the telepathic Kreton reveals that the people of earth are, contrary to what they may think, uncivilised. He enjoys "the wonderfully primitive assumption that all strangers are hostile," and sees that "your deepest pleasure is violence." Kreton then plans to institute a dictatorship and, much like the dictator in Vidal's preceding works, to make use of a people yearning for an absolute in order to start his war. Yet before he can do so the planet is saved by another visitor, who reveals that Kreton is "[m]entally and morally" retarded.¹² As with *Messiah*, Vidal concluded (albeit in a more comic vein) that to prioritise the emotions is to enable the rule of a dictator and the absolutist thinking that led to the Cold War. For civilisation to exist, he lectured his audience of an estimated 30 million, one has to learn reason.

¹⁰ Note to *A Sense of Justice*, *ibid.*, 78-79.

¹¹ The transformation of the anti-Communist hysteria into science fiction was a standard of the B-movie industry throughout the 1950's. From the pivotal 1951 *The Thing (From Another World)* in which an indomitable vegetable creature crashes its spaceship in the Arctic, to the hysterical *Invaders From Mars* (1953), *It Came From Outer Space* (1953), and the Americanised version of H.G. Wells' *War of the Worlds* (1953), b-movies warned that alien visitation inevitably threatened the serenity and prosperity of post-war America.

¹² *Visit to a Small Planet*, *Best Television Plays*, 242, 232, 247.

This television golden age was, however, short-lived. "I was wrong about everything," Vidal wrote in 1961. "By the end of the 1950's, original drama had largely vanished from the air . . . The advertisers make more money with junk; and since the right to exploit others in the interest of making money is the only right the average American would lay down his life for, there will be little change in television."¹³ The litany of closures is instructive. *Philco Television Playhouse*, the CBS series that screened *A Sense of Justice*, concluded its eight year run in 1956. The NBC series *Kraft Theatre*, which had consistently produced a play each week from May 1947, finished in 1958. The distinguished CBS series *Studio One*, on which *Dark Possession* had been screened, was cancelled in 1958. The "chance to experiment, even to fail, without being immediately yanked off the air," as the academic Michael Kerbel described this golden age, was overthrown by the demands of capital.¹⁴ Original drama was undermined by advertising strategy. Initially a program would be controlled by a single advertiser, which sometimes resulted in specific censorship.¹⁵ However, by the end of the 1950's advertising had been transformed under the pressure of the shorter "spot" advertisement, which encouraged the networks to create programmes that created a "buying mood."¹⁶ The drama anthology thus gave way to quiz shows and westerns: the prize and the ensuing celebrity status of the contestants on the quiz show underpinned the objectives of the consumer society, and the western replicated the hero-villain paradigm which underpinned the Cold War. As a writer, and as a political thinker, Vidal was faced, again, with disappointment.

¹³ 'Note to "Writing Plays for Television," ' *Rocking the Boat*, 326.

¹⁴ Michael Kerbel, 'The Golden Age of TV Drama,' *Television: the Critical View*, ed. Horace Newcomb, Third Edition (1982), 51.

¹⁵ An interesting example is the sponsorship of *Judgment at Nuremberg* by the American Gas Association. Allusions to the fatal potential of gas were prohibited, and thus any mention of the gas chambers used in the Nazi concentration camps was erased from the final program. *Ibid.*, 61.

¹⁶ Ben H. Bagdikian, *The Media Monopoly*, Third Edition (Boston 1990), 141

In 1959 Vidal wrote the television play *The Indestructible Mr Gore*. One of the last live dramas, it was broadcast on NBC's *Sunday Showcase*, December 13, 1959. The subject was the early career of T.P. Gore. It follows his apprenticeship as a lawyer through to his marriage to Nina Kay in 1900. "In those days," the folksy narrator tells the audience, "they had political picnics . . . where well-known speakers would debate the issues of the day. And people used to enjoy the speakers the way they do personalities like Jack Paar these days." The key, of course, is that although the allure of personality was important, the politicians debated the issues. Nevertheless, the play itself is more about Gore's bravery than his political thought.¹⁷ At this point in Vidal's career, it was Gore's stand as an individual, and how such a stand informed his political career, that influenced his awareness of what the American politician should be. "The most extraordinary thing about him, aside from his overcoming the handicap of being blind," Vidal stated in a 1960 speech, "was his complete fearlessness . . . If he thought he was right he would go against the majority without worrying about the consequences."¹⁸ In 1959, Vidal believed that the ideal politician would demonstrate an unwavering devotion to principle over and above the shifting ground of public opinion. This was likewise the central thesis of John F. Kennedy's 1956 book *Profiles In Courage*, in which he praised men whose desire to "maintain a reputation for integrity and courage was stronger than his desire to maintain office," and whose "faith that his course was the best one, and would ultimately be vindicated, outweighed his fear of public reprisal."¹⁹ This stand would prove crucial to Vidal's endorsement of Kennedy.

¹⁷ *The Indestructible Mr Gore*, 13, GVC, Box 31, Folder 3.

¹⁸ Unidentified speech in 'Campaign Speeches, papers on campaign, 1960,' GVC, Box 10, Folder 6. Many of the speeches collected here are undated, and fairly disorganised. They are all typed on 6" by 4" postcards. All subsequent references to speeches are from this folder unless otherwise stated.

¹⁹ John F. Kennedy, *Profiles in Courage*, 1956 (1957), 203.

For Vidal, the principled Kennedy represented an opportunity to realise the unfulfilled potential of the post-war era. Throughout his campaign, Kennedy committed himself to the reinvigoration of a country in which too many “have lost their way, their will and their historic sense of purpose.” He ascribed the blame for this dereliction to the Eisenhower presidency, which he characterised as “lean years of drought and famine” that “have withered the field of ideas.” Conversely, he proposed “a new generation of leadership” unrestrained by the political tradition to which the current administration was shackled. He invoked a new frontier “of unknown opportunities and paths” that issued a challenge to the American people. The symbol of the New Frontier, Kennedy declared, “sums up not what I intend to *offer* the American people, but what I intend to *ask* of them.”²⁰ What Vidal found so attractive about this rhetoric was that it proposed the return to a broader conception of representative government, and endorsed an alliance between government and the intellectual establishment that had been disregarded throughout the Eisenhower era. Kennedy moreover confirmed Vidal’s understanding that the exceptional state could only be ensured by a strong leader who would uphold the *idea* of America rather than follow the fluctuations of public opinion.

The cornerstone of Kennedy’s appeal to the intellectual establishment was that he promised to reinvigorate an electorate narcotised under Eisenhower. At the time of the 1960 election, Vidal was an ideologue very much in the liberal-intellectual tradition of those hired by Kennedy to legitimate his campaign. Vidal and Schlesinger both wrote approvingly of Kennedy’s disdain for the separation of the intellectual and the politician. One of the reasons that intellectuals were drawn to Kennedy, Schlesinger wrote, “was their gradual recognition of his desire to bring the world of power and the world of ideas together in alliance—or rather, as he himself

²⁰ Cited, Schlesinger, *Thousand Days*, 64. Acceptance speech at Democratic Convention, 15 July 1960.

saw it, to restore the collaboration between the two worlds which had marked the early republic.” Schlesinger wrote that Kennedy would constantly harass historians on the question of how “a small and under developed nation could produce men of such genius.”²¹ Vidal recalled much the same experience. “How did the original United States, a colonial society of three million people,” Kennedy would ask, “produce so much intellectual genius?”²² Kennedy, Schlesinger noted, wanted to reunite the intellectual and the politician, and thus demonstrated an awareness of precisely how Eisenhower democracy had undermined the original idea of America. This is why he held such appeal for Vidal.

“For twenty years,” Vidal wrote in 1961, “the culture and the mind of the United States ignored politics.” In the ‘40s and ‘50s, he observed, the “intellectual establishment opted for the word ‘alienation.’”²³ The political philosophy of Kennedy inaugurated a change. His emphasis on the importance of the intellectual, and a concurrent return to the first principles of the United States, promised the reinvigoration of the American Dream. Vidal was consequently drawn into this network in the 1960 election. In reaction to the politics of the 1950s, he ran for office as a Democrat in the traditionally Republican New York 29th Congressional District. Although he wanted to run as an Independent “on the ground that any party label is committing” his campaign rhetoric corresponded with that of the Kennedy machine.²⁴ “The guard is changing all over the world,” Vidal accordingly observed. “New ideas, new responsibilities, new loyalties are in the making. You and I—we have the chance to be part of great deeds. I say take that chance. Let the idea of America again prevail.”²⁵ If Vidal could not lay the philosophical grounds for the golden age in his work as a writer, he would do so as a politician.

²¹ Ibid., 107-108.

²² *Views from a Window*, 114 (1973).

²³ ‘Kennedy,’ *US*, 798.

²⁴ ‘HUAC Revisited,’ *Rocking The Boat*, 81.

²⁵ Unidentified speech.

The *idea* of America as an exceptional state was central to Vidal's candidacy. Like Kennedy, he argued that for the politician to effectively represent the people it was the duty of that people to be directly involved in the democratic process. In a political advertisement printed in local papers across the district, he contended that "[m]any people find politics distasteful, forgetting that they are the politics." As a result, he continued,

[r]epresentation is a two-way affair between the people and their chosen spokesman in the Congress. If the Representative does not maintain contact with the people, he cannot represent them. But even more to the point, if we ask nothing of him we have failed at our end to keep the line of communication clear.²⁶

Vidal argued that the active participation of the electorate was the cornerstone of American government. He reasoned that it was therefore the duty of the electorate to direct the issues through such involvement. "[S]top thinking of the government as the enemy," he advised in an address to the Columbia County Farm Bureau, "because you are the government. You and I can make this country the kind of country that we want. Our only enemy is indifference. The more we care," he concluded, "the more we can make this experiment called the United States work."²⁷ The fundamental thesis of Vidal's campaign was the proposition that the American idea of government was legitimated solely by, as the Constitution stated, "We, the people." For the experiment in democracy to work the people must therefore be versed in the very complexity of the polity and not disassociated from it by the conformity which had characterised the Eisenhower era.

²⁶ 'a question answered... by Gore Vidal,' *The Kingston Daily Freeman*, July 1, 1960.

²⁷ 'Remarks of Gore Vidal, Candidate for Congress, 29th Congressional District,' August 7, 1960.

Throughout his campaign, Vidal maintained that the medium of television had inaugurated a conformity which had in turn undermined the political process. By 1960 television was the primary source of information for the electorate. The census indicated that 88 percent of families were in possession of a television set, and by 1960, Theodore White concluded in *The Making of the President*, it was “now possible for the first time to answer an inquiring foreign visitor as to what Americans do in the evening. The answer is clear: they watch television.”²⁸ In an address to a graduating class, Vidal stated that “[t]elevision is the most important single thing in this country. And what is television but a medium controlled by advertisers?” He followed that because “the open discussion of any real problem in a play or, more important, in the news, is bound to offend somebody that means that the journalist and the playwright must not say anything which might upset anyone who otherwise would be inclined to buy the product.” Television therefore threatened the electoral process for it was founded on the principle of advertising. “Presidential candidates are being packaged by the same advertisers who sell us soap,” he stated. Consequently “that means that less and less will we hear what is really going on and more and more will we be lulled by national leaders whose opinions seldom vary from the Gallup poll that morning.”²⁹ The consequent political danger, he concluded, was that as television had metastasised into a medium ruled solely by advertisers, the viewing public would therefore be quarry for its control.

A concurrent and equal problem, Vidal argued, was that it proved harder to maintain individuality in contemporary US society. He proposed that in a population which had grown by roughly 30 million from 1950 to 1960 “it is certainly possible to lose one’s sense of identity, to place less and less value on human life and individuality and more and more importance on the state.” As Eric F. Goldman

²⁸ Theodore H. White, *The Making of the President 1960* (London, 1962), 279-280.

²⁹ ‘Address to graduating class,’ 17-19, 21.

observed, the new suburban lifestyle that resulted from the affluent 50s nurtured this tendency. "A web of relationships bound most Americans in with state and federal governments," he wrote.

The unquestionable trend was toward a home in a suburb—the mushrooming miles of middle-class and worker's suburbs—where the prime virtue was adjustment to what the neighbors thought and did. Under the circumstances the urge was not so much for individualism as it was for getting oneself into the most profitable and comfortable relationship with some larger group or organisation.³⁰

Vidal maintained that the solution to this problem would be to understand how in the American system of government "the individual is at the center of the body politic."

The principal architect of this republic was Thomas Jefferson who wrote: 'Whenever the people are well informed they can be trusted with their own government: whenever things get so far wrong as to attract their notice, they may be relied upon to set them to rights... I have no fear but that the result of our experiment will be that men may be trusted to govern themselves without a master...' Now that puts the case for this kind of society about as well and as simply as you need. The key of course to Jefferson's statement is the qualifying phrase well-informed. Unless we are well informed we cannot govern ourselves properly. If we cannot govern ourselves properly we shall one day be governed by some crafty Caesar and when that time comes our great experiment would have failed.³¹

If the people are to be well-informed the politician has to rise above the standards of advertising, to "go against the majority without worrying about the consequences," as Vidal wrote of his grandfather.³² If it is based solely on the principles of advertising, television is a threat to the identity and to the exceptionalism of the United States. "You may say that television and advertising are only a part of our lives," Vidal stated, "but I propose that they are the key to our culture."³³ The result of an informed electorate, moreover, would be a democratic system in which the central man would be representative of the people rather than a Caesar. Only through this social and political organisation, Vidal argued, could the exceptional state be realised.

³⁰ Eric F. Goldman, *The Crucial Decade—and After* (1960), 264-265.

³¹ 'Address to graduating class,' 25-26.

³² See note 18.

³³ 'Address to graduating class,' 25-26, 20.

The idea that political representation should be determined by an informed electorate aligned Vidal further with the Kennedy think-tank. A primary concern of the think-tank was that Richard Nixon, Kennedy's opponent in the presidential election, was perceived as representative of both the people at large and the fulfilment of the American dream. "[H]e epitomized all those traits that liberals wanted to ignore when they celebrated the American 'mainstream'," Garry Wills later concluded in his study *Nixon Agonistes*. "He was more competitive, *much* closer to the common man."³⁴ To confront the candidacy of Nixon, the think-tank was deployed to persuade the electorate that he personified the *misrepresentation* of the body politic. Schlesinger accordingly argued in his short book *Kennedy or Nixon: Does It Make Any Difference?* that, unlike Kennedy, Nixon was merely "obsessed with appearances rather than the reality of things, obsessed above all with his own image, seeking reassurance through winning, but never knowing why he is so mad to win or what he will do with his victory."³⁵ Central to Kennedy's rhetoric was the conviction that Nixon was nothing but opportunistic, and that the man of the people would not necessarily represent the people. Vidal had drawn a similar conclusion in his play *The Best Man*.

The Best Man was written in 1959, when the Democratic presidential candidate of choice was still the archetypal intellectual politician, Adlai Stevenson. It opened on Broadway on 31 March, 1960, and ran for 520 performances. Although it is set at an undesignated, one-party political convention, the play deliberates on

³⁴ Garry Wills, *Nixon Agonistes*, 1970 (1971), 528.

³⁵ Cited, Herbert S. Parmet, *Richard Nixon and His America*, (Boston 1990), 361.

questions fundamental to the ensuing election. The two central characters, William Russell and Joe Cantwell, personify respectively the intellectual and the opportunist. Thus Russell suggested Stevenson, and Cantwell Nixon. Through these two characters, Vidal staged a dissertation on the state of politics at the end of the Eisenhower era.

The focus of the play is on that which is behind the image intended for public consumption. The first scene is loaded with learned quips fired at half-witted reporters by William Russell. It immediately determines the primary difference between the two main characters. When the question of the Gallup poll is raised by one reporter, Russell unequivocally states

I don't believe in polls. Accurate or not. And if I may bore you with one of my little sermons: life is not a popularity contest; and neither is politics. The important thing for any government is educating the people about issues, *not* following the ups and downs of popular opinion.

The reporter continues to question Russell, asking if that means he "does not respect popular opinion." He responds that

If the people want the wrong thing, if the people don't understand the issue, if they've been misled by the press . . . then I think a President should ignore their opinion and try to convince them that his way is the right way.

Russell's answer is that of the model politician Vidal would endorse in his election campaign. His conclusion is based on the understanding that the electorate is largely uninformed, and it is the duty of the president to govern over and above the sources of misinformation. Furthermore, Russell reinforces Vidal's understanding of the dangers represented by television. "I don't know much about images. That's a word from advertising where you don't sell the product, you sell the image of the product.

And sometimes the image is a fake.”³⁶ The predicament in contemporary politics, Vidal demonstrated in *The Best Man*, was how to best negotiate this trend.

The historical significance of this meditation is in how the public image of Russell is contrasted with that of Cantwell. “Joe Cantwell is nothin’ but ambition,” the former president Art Hockstader advises Russell. “Just plain naked ambition.”³⁷ Russell likewise observes that Cantwell can be everything precisely because he is nothing. “He’ll do anything to win,” he tells Hockstader. “And that makes him dangerous.” Russell identifies Cantwell’s political strength in the plain fact that he will accommodate. Furthermore, Cantwell is, unlike Russell, a man of the people, and deliberately makes this distinction. “I understand the people of this country. Because I am one of them,” he states. “I know how to manoeuvre. How to win.” The correlation Cantwell makes between the first and the last point is the key to his character. Like Nixon, Cantwell may have been one of the people but that was no guarantee that he would represent them. The understanding that Nixon epitomised the values of the American mainstream ignored by the Kennedy liberals made for the successful image of a democratic ideal. In the final analysis, however, this would be to underplay the social and historical context Vidal scrutinises. If the age is in fact regulated by the opinion of the advertisers, who does Cantwell represent if he conforms to public opinion?

To illustrate this question, Vidal isolated the issue of foreign policy. The liberal consensus was that the Eisenhower administration had consented to the reduction of American global power. Kennedy could thus make an issue of the alleged missile-gap, and the unwillingness of the administration to aid the Cuban rebels resisting the rule of Fidel Castro. Through the character of Russell, Vidal

³⁶ *The Best Man*, 161, 162. This edition collected in *Three Plays* (London, 1962).

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 175.

argued that in the context of the late 1950s, the bending to public opinion on foreign policy would be disastrous for the US. "Suppose the Chinese were to threaten to occupy India and we were faced with the possibility of a world war," Russell proposed to Hockstader.

Now that is the kind of thing that you and I understand and I think we could handle it without going to war and without losing India. But what would Joe do? He would look at the Gallup poll. And what would the Gallup poll tell him? Well, ask the average American, do you want to run the risk of being blown up to save India? And he'll say, hell, no! Joe would do the popular thing: to hell with India, and we would be the weaker for it, and that day we're all afraid of would be closer.³⁸

Vidal concentrates on the fact that the average American in the 1950s was insulated from the geopolitical consequences of a world assumed to be under threat from the spectre of Communism. This was, moreover, augmented by the proliferation of Westerns and police dramas in which the real enemy was to be found within. In *The Best Man* this took the form of Cantwell's confrontation with the Mafia, through which he made his name.³⁹ Vidal therefore reached the conclusion that to observe public opinion would be to undermine US foreign policy because the public could not sufficiently understand the implications as a result of late 1950s culture.

In *The Best Man*, and in his election campaign, Vidal made this a central issue and showed himself to be a resolute Cold Warrior. In an interview for the *Poughkeepsie Journal* given after a trip to the annual Festival of Berlin (at which *The Best Man* was performed) he described Berlin as "the symbol of American foreign policy." He argued that the next administration should therefore actively endeavour to resolve "the German question" and "not allow West Berlin to be absorbed to the Communist camp." In conclusion he observed that "[s]hould this ever happen, it will

³⁸ Ibid., 177.

³⁹ To a certain extent this corresponded with Bobby Kennedy's work for the Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations questioning the influence of Jimmy Hoffa. It also corresponded to Nixon's involvement with HUAC in the 1940's, which established him as a political figure. Furthermore, it also suggests Estes Kefauver's investigations into organised crime, which afforded him access to the national platform.

be the end of American influence in Europe, and the end of freedom for that continent, for Berlin is the gate through which the enemies of civilization mean to come.”⁴⁰ For Vidal the guarantee of freedom in Europe was concurrent with the continued presence of American troops. An active foreign policy designed to counter the coercion policies exercised by the Communist bloc was therefore essential to the maintenance of his idea of democracy. Kennedy had taken a similar stand on Berlin in July 1960. He stated “that we are going to meet our commitment to defend the liberty and the people of Berlin, and that if Mr. Krushchev pushes it to the ultimate, we are prepared to meet our obligation.”⁴¹ As Vidal understood it, “[t]he United States is in combat with the Communist system and in that struggle we are this year falling behind. Not only militarily but even more important economically and idealistically.”⁴² Furthermore, the frustrations that galvanised public opinion throughout the Eisenhower era, he maintained, were produced under a false reality created by the government and the television networks.

In *The Best Man* Vidal concentrates on how this dependence on an unreliable public opinion corresponds to the transformation of the political process caused by the medium of television. Russell therefore argues that the opportunist Cantwell is not versed in the substance of politics but in the theatrics of television. The Cantwell style, he explains, is to “[n]ever pause for an answer, in the best tradition of a television presenter.” Cantwell is thus the antithesis of the politician Russell described in the opening scene of the play. He, like Nixon, is “something of a Frankenstein’s monster,” the self-made man created “out of the pieces of his victims.”⁴³ Through the conflict that animates the plot of *The Best Man*, Vidal argues this is a consequence of an era governed by television. The more important the

⁴⁰ *Poughkeepsie Journal*, October 8, 1960, 1.

⁴¹ Schlesinger, *Thousand Days*, 323.

⁴² Unidentified fragment, 2-2A.

⁴³ *Best Man*, 225, 223.

projection of a competent television image becomes, he concludes, the less important are the issues.

The Best Man is not principally a play about issues, but about the threat presented by the character of celebrity politics to the institution of government. In the first act Russell is established as the man concerned with the issues, whereas Cantwell is concerned only with winning. In Russell's first appearance he is questioned by reporters. The first encounter with Cantwell is through the medium of television. "All I can say is come Wednesday I only hope that the best man wins..."⁴⁴ he is heard to declare from the television set Mrs. Cantwell is watching. Russell gives consideration to the issues (primarily in relation to Cantwell) in his meeting with Hockstader. In the equivalent meeting Cantwell is concerned only with winning, and primarily frets about the Gallup poll. In emphasising the correlation between Cantwell the politician and the *medium* of television, Vidal outlines exactly why he (and by association Nixon) is such a threat.

Off television and on, Cantwell is concerned not with the issues but with the exercise of his political strength. The same criticism was levelled at Nixon over his involvement in the Alger Hiss case. The case that founded Cantwell's reputation was his accusation that "the United States is secretly governed by the Mafia." The charge is an equivalent to Nixon's contention that Communist pressure within the field of government determined the policy of the United States. Hockstader deflates Cantwell's assertion as erroneous:

You went after a poor bunch of Sicilian bandits on the lower East Side of New York and pretended they were running all the crime in America. Well, they're not. Of course we have a pretty fair idea who is, but you didn't go after any of them, did you? No, sir, because those big rascals are heavy contributors to political campaigns.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Ibid., 181.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 188. Again this also suggests Bobby Kennedy and Estes Kefauver.

Hockstader makes it clear that the case was significant not because of what it was in itself, but because of what Cantwell achieved through publicising it. The case was a springboard for his political career and was primarily about him winning. Equally, the Hiss case became so much about Nixon winning (and of course, Nixon claimed, the legitimacy of HUAC) that Hiss was eventually indicted not for being part of a Communist spy ring, which was the aim of the investigation, but for perjury. This event is the bedrock for understanding the character of Cantwell and the smear campaign at the centre of the play.

In *The Best Man*, Vidal is concerned with how the question of morality is used as part of the process of winning. The issues are irrelevant to the politics of the play, but the question of morality is not. In “our confused age,” he wrote, “morality means, simply, sex found out.”⁴⁶ Vidal uses this as is the focus of the play precisely because it demonstrates how an irrelevant side issue could be used by the opportunist with the aim only of winning. In his meeting with Hockstader, Cantwell produces a file on Russell. It is a directory of the questions that could jeopardise his political career. The central article is a psychiatric report written after Russell had a nervous breakdown. Cantwell twists the content of the report to further his point. “[A]ll the big words are there, manic depressive, paranoid pattern, attempted suicide . . . And then all that combined with his playing around with women.” For Cantwell’s purposes there is a literal connection between mental instability and promiscuity. Through the protestations of Hockstader, and the increasing embellishment of the report by Cantwell (who eventually decides that Russell “is known to be psychopathic”), Vidal makes it clear this is nothing but irrelevant cant. It is “an unwritten law,” the political campaigner Mrs Gamadge qualifies, “that anything to do

⁴⁶ ‘Preface to *The Best Man*,’ *Three Plays*, 155.

with *private* lives is out in politics.”⁴⁷ Through his smear campaign Cantwell registers how politics has changed, how the old agreements no longer hold, and how in the fight to win there are no restrictions.

The argument is clarified by Russell. When offered the material to counter Cantwell’s smear, he hesitates, and claims

this is exactly the kind of thing I went into politics to stop! The business of gossip instead of issues, personalities instead of policies . . . We’ve got enough on Cantwell’s public life to defeat him without going into his private life which is nobody’s business!

This is the moral issue around which the action of the play revolves. To counter Cantwell, Russell has to act like him and therefore accept that the business of politics is conducted this way. He nevertheless realises that he has no choice but to listen to the accusation, and to use it to offset Cantwell’s intention to smear him. The accusation, of course, is about sex. Cantwell is alleged to have had homosexual conduct while in the army. Russell is loathe to use the information. “If I start to fight like Cantwell I lose all meaning.” The problem, he argues, is that once this process starts it is ultimately destructive. “And so,” he concludes, “one by one, these compromises, these small corruptions destroy character.”⁴⁸ To allow the opportunist to determine the process is to destroy politics from within.

In a speech about the issues raised in *The Best Man*, Vidal argued that the simplistic dependence on the politics of the image epitomised the danger of television. “Our political leaders want to sell us an image, not a man,” he observed. “And it may very well be that our next president will turn out to be some sort of opportunist who, meaning nothing in himself, can project the popular image desired at any given moment: shifting from role to role like an actor.” The danger of “this

⁴⁷ *Best Man*, 190-191, 192, 209.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 203, 202, 215, 216.

kind of empty politics,” as represented by Cantwell and Nixon, was that it traded on public indifference. “As our political statesmen become more and more like mechanical television commercials, the world becomes more and more a dangerous place for this country,” he continued. “No one hears the new countries knocking at the door as we divert ourselves with political spectacles.”⁴⁹ In his attack on the legacy of the Eisenhower era and the politics of the opportunist Nixon, Vidal argued that the style of politics they inaugurated undermined the safety of a country that did not rise to its imperial role. By turning inward as a response to an indeterminate Cold War, and by relying on the opinion of a public taught to condemn the outsider, political representation would lose all meaning and become one with the commercial.

The apathetic uniformity of the television era is the focus for Vidal’s denunciation of the Eisenhower legacy. The ideal standard that the advertisers offend no one, he concluded, undermined the social and political meaning of the country. Consequently, as Alice Russell advises Joe Cantwell’s wife, “if you offend no one, you don’t please anyone much either, do you? But I suppose that is an occupational hazard in politics. We are all interchangeably inoffensive.”⁵⁰ The danger of promiscuity in *politics*, Vidal argued, was that it rendered the process meaningless. “Too many of our public men nowadays mean absolutely nothing because they want to be liked by everyone,” he stated. “They follow the Gallup poll instead of their own inner conviction and knowledge.”⁵¹ Under the rule of advertising, the standard that one should do the unpopular thing, and then educate public opinion, was under threat.

⁴⁹ Fragment of an unidentified speech.

⁵⁰ *Best Man*, 207.

⁵¹ Fragment of an unidentified speech.

In the final analysis, Russell is, like T.P. Gore, a man of principle who would “put his career at risk for some overriding principle.”⁵² Through the character of William Russell, Vidal demonstrated the value of the man of principle in the television era. Rather than allow Cantwell to win, and rather than release the material on his alleged homosexual conduct, Russell sacrifices his claim to the presidency. “I lost my temper,” he explains as to why he considered smearing Cantwell. When confronted with the choice to either make public the information or accept Cantwell’s offer of ^{the} vice presidency, Russell breaks the deadlock between them by releasing his votes to the third candidate. “Neither the angel of darkness nor the angel of light . . . if I may exaggerate my own goodness . . . has carried the day,” Russell spelled out to Cantwell. “We cancelled each other out.”⁵³ Russell may not have won, but the point is that he stopped Cantwell and all that he represented from winning. In determining the presidential candidacy of the third, marginal aspirant, he reinforced his stand as the man of principle. In this conclusion Vidal used the machinery of the political convention to comment on issues which related to the presidential election. He introduced the idea that a third choice somewhere between the intellectual and the opportunist would break the conceivable deadlock of a Nixon-Stevenson battle in 1960.

The resolution to *The Best Man* implied that neither the opportunistic Cantwell nor the intellectual Russell would have made a good president. In letting Russell and Cantwell cancel each other out Vidal suggests that the more obscure applicant would be better suited to the current demands of the office. “Men without faces tend to get elected president,” Russell explains, “and power or responsibility or honor fill in the features, usually pretty well.”⁵⁴ Bernard Dick concluded in his study *The*

⁵² *Palimpsest*, 57.

⁵³ *Best Man*, 237.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 238.

Apostate Angel that this was a trick for it provided “a ready solution.” He argued that instead of wanting either the intellectual or the opportunist to win, the audience “hopes for the best man, that messianic unknown . . . And it is precisely because he is an unknown that one naively believes he will be the golden mean between compromise and conscience.”⁵⁵ Dick fails to understand the historical context in which the play was written. The play is, as Vidal noted, “a small essay in Presidential temperament.”⁵⁶ Confronted with the possibility of an election that would pit the opportunist Nixon against the intellectual Stevenson, who had been defeated by Eisenhower in 1952 and 1956, Vidal wrote a play which concluded that neither candidate would be suitable for the presidency in the television age. In so doing he prepared the social and political justification for the nomination of the intellectual and man of action, John F. Kennedy.

In the 1952 and 1956 elections, Vidal had been an active supporter of Adlai Stevenson. In 1960 however he declared his endorsement of Kennedy early in the primary campaign. In an address to the Harding Club the previous November he demonstrated why. Vidal argued that the compromise he described in *The Best Man* would be dangerous in the geopolitical framework of the 1960 election. “There is always a danger that when there is a deadlock between strong qualified men,” he stated, “that a safe man will be suddenly thrust upon us and made our President.” He observed that compared to 1920, when the compromise Harding was elected, “the world is a more dangerous place . . . Between breakfast and supper the United States can be destroyed. A bewildered President, uneasy and bored with his job, might just bring the curtain down on us all.”⁵⁷ A compromise on the order of Harding would be unsuitable for the requirements of the imperial presidency in 1960. An unspecified third candidate, elected by default as an alternative to either Stevenson or Nixon,

⁵⁵ Bernard Dick, *The Apostate Angel* (1974), 121.

⁵⁶ ‘Note to “A Note on *The Best Man*,”’ *Rocking The Boat*, 330.

⁵⁷ ‘Speech to Harding Club,’ 28.

would be just as unsuitable. Vidal consequently advocated the election of Kennedy to counter to this threat.

Furthermore, in advocating Kennedy, Vidal stressed the importance of understanding the social and political context of 1960. He argued that a successful candidate would have to be germane to his era. The key factor in the election would therefore be television. In an interview published in the *Boston Traveler* on January 14, 1960, Vidal explained why. He outlined a break from the tradition of campaigning that Stevenson represented. The Kennedy approach, he explained, would be far less formal than the Stevenson style of conventional speeches. "Round table discussions with two or three people are right for Jack," he continued. "He's best in the informal, easy session."⁵⁸ The strategy Vidal advocated was built on his understanding that, under the influence of television, the electorate would not vote for an austere intellectual candidate. Stevenson, like the fictional William Russell, could no longer appeal to the age he aspired to represent. Vidal argued that, conversely, Kennedy could. He believed that Kennedy combined Stevenson's best qualities with an image suited to the television age. He proposed that the campaign meet the demands of a television era to ensure his success.

THE PROMISE OF THE KENNEDY PRESIDENCY

On polling day in the 29th Congressional District Gore Vidal polled 79,252 of the total votes cast. His Republican opponent, Ernest J. Wharton, polled 103,966. The District cast 117,942 votes for Nixon and 72,389 for Kennedy. "I ran ahead of the ticket, carrying all the cities, losing all the countryside," Vidal reported in a letter to

⁵⁸ Eleanor Roberts, 'Expert Guides Sen. Kennedy's TV Campaign,' *Boston Traveler*, January 14, 1960.

John F. Kennedy. It was “a famous defeat,” he added, “but still a defeat.”⁵⁹ His ideas on federal aid to education, and an increased geopolitical role for the United States, suggested that the cities registered the need for change, but that the small towns still resisted the increasing power of the federal government. Nevertheless, the 29th District was notoriously Republican. In fact, the only time Columbia County voted Democrat, as the manager of the Colgreene Broadcasting Company pointed out to Vidal, was against Lincoln in 1860.⁶⁰ However, the final election result was both a recognition of Vidal’s hard fought campaign, and an indication of the changeable voting pattern in a nation more interrelated than ever before under the homogenising influence of television.

In the nationwide vote Kennedy polled 34, 221,463 (49.7%) in the popular vote, and 303 in the electoral vote. Nixon drew 34, 108, 582 (49.6%) of the popular vote, and, more decisively, 219 of the electoral votes. In the weeks following the election, Vidal started work on an article which described the promise of the Kennedy presidency. He observed that under Kennedy “the twentieth century” had been “installed” in the White House, and argued that the key to this was Kennedy’s relationship with the media. “In the White House press room,” he reported, “reporters are permanently gathered. Photographers are on constant alert and television cameramen stand by, for news is made at all hours.” Kennedy encouraged this increased presence, and as a result the journalists were sympathetic to him. Vidal described this “affection” as a product of his candid manner. “There is no pomp; there is little evasion in his manner; he involves them directly in what he is doing.”⁶¹ Kennedy’s courtship of the media, as described by Vidal, is reminiscent of the style in which he seduced the intellectual establishment. The key point is that *they* are

⁵⁹ Letter to the President-Elect, November 14, 1960, GVC, Box 10, Folder 1.

⁶⁰ Letter to Vidal from Joseph Gindin, August 11, 1960., *ibid.* The counties that comprise the 29th District are Columbia, Dutchess, Colgreene, Schoharie and Ulster.

⁶¹ ‘President Kennedy,’ *US*, 797, 798. (*Sunday Telegraph*, April 9, 1961.)

involved in what *he* is doing. In like manner Kennedy could therefore guarantee the continued support of the country through a media machine that applauded him. Nevertheless, Vidal represented this control as essential to Kennedy's success for the media, and television in particular, was the platform on which he would communicate his ideas.

Such active management of the media was fundamental to the operation of presidential power conceived by the Kennedy think-tank. The format of the televised press conference which Vidal had praised in the primary suited Kennedy's informal style because the philosophy of pragmatism demanded that he not act but react. "When he was told something, he wanted to know what he could do about it," Schlesinger wrote in *A Thousand Days*. "He was pragmatic in the sense that he tested the meaning of a proposition by its consequences."⁶² Schlesinger celebrated the fact that Kennedy was free from the constraint of ideology. Yet for all the bravado and the emphasis on the merits of a presidency "in the very thick of the fight," this philosophy was not one of action but reaction.⁶³ A dynamic president who could deal with any situation and, as a result, enhance his image through his access to the media platform, could not effectively lead. Kennedy was best in informal debate because his skill as a politician was to react, and not act. Vidal was nevertheless enchanted by the possibility of the Kennedy presidency, and celebrated him as active, and insatiable. "He is restless; he wants to know everything." He argued that only through such a strategy "can a president be effective."⁶⁴ As an operation this looked good in theory but it did not register the basic contradiction of pragmatism. In the final analysis Kennedy's television strategy defined his presidency and not its promise.

⁶² Schlesinger, *Thousand Days*, 109.

⁶³ John F. Kennedy, speech to the National Press Club, 1960, cited *ibid.*, 117.

⁶⁴ 'Kennedy,' *US*, 802.

As a consequence of his appeal, Vidal characterised Kennedy as the new messiah. He clearly did not see a correlation between his endorsement of the strong leader Kennedy, and Eugene Luther's role as the intellectual apologist for John Cave in *Messiah*. Cave's rise to power was achieved through the medium of television. His public relations team orchestrated his appearances, and they created the rhetoric through which Cave achieved cultural legitimacy. This strategy was no different from that of the Kennedy think-tank. His rhetoric was forged through his alliance with Theodore Sorenson and Arthur Schlesinger. His press schedule was likewise determined by Pierre Salinger. Through his charm and his wit he was an ideal television performer. "It may well be," Vidal had warned, "that our next president will turn out to be some sort of opportunist who, meaning nothing in himself, can project the image desired at any given moment."⁶⁵ As a devotee of Kennedy, enslaved by his promise to renew the golden age of empire, Vidal only saw this threat from Nixon. "What doubts one may have had," Vidal recalled some years after the illusion had failed, "were obscured by the charm and intelligence of John F. Kennedy. He appeared to be beautifully onto himself . . . As a result, there were few intellectuals in 1960 who were not beguiled by the spectacle of a president who seemed always to be standing at a certain remove from himself, watching with amusement his own performance."⁶⁶ As far as Vidal understood him, Kennedy was the proactive and intellectual president the times required, and whose commitment to the idea of exceptionalism promised a new golden age. Vidal was bewitched by the image that made Kennedy such a great media success.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Unidentified fragment of a speech.

⁶⁶ 'The Holy Family,' *US*, 809-810. (*Esquire*, April 1967.)

⁶⁷ There is a parallel between the work of Vidal and Norman Mailer on the subject of Kennedy in 1960. For a detailed discussion on how both believed that the Kennedy presidency would release them from the constraints of the 1950s see appendix I.

Vidal endorsed Kennedy's active management of the media. He celebrated the new president as a dextrous leader who had mastered the numerous threads of executive power. The result was that "he alone can view and manipulate the entire complex of domestic and international policy. No one in the administration may circumvent him, because none can master more than a part of the whole." The Kennedy Vidal described controlled power in the same way as FDR. "The ultimate knowledge of the whole is power," he continued, "and, finally, the exercise of power is an art like any other." Kennedy was a matchless leader for the system as Vidal understood it because he could control the power of the executive branch and wield it to an appropriate end. His employment of the media machine, as with his control over the executive branch, would therefore be essential for his dynamic style of leadership to work. In effect, his conclusion was Kennedy or bust. "Civilizations are rarely granted a second chance,"⁶⁸ Vidal concluded his observations, thereby reinforcing this point. He believed that Kennedy could release the country from the conformity of the 50s and therefore endorsed the control of a media machine that had maintained such conformity. In spite of his idealistic stand that the central man would be an effective symbol in an informed age, what Vidal advocated was, in effect, a form of Caesarism.

The subject of Caesarism was somewhat in vogue among intellectual circles following the publication of the Robert Graves translation of Suetonius' *The Twelve Caesars* in 1957. Vidal penned a review, later published in *The Nation*, which is a definitive statement of his understanding of the power a president could effectively

⁶⁸ 'Kennedy,' *US*, 803.

wield.⁶⁹ In the preceding year the historian Clinton Rossiter had written of the unprecedented power retained by the modern presidency in *The American Presidency*. Rossiter concluded that the power Eisenhower inherited was of recent design. He argued that FDR founded the modern presidency through the expansion of the bureaucracy and his control over the media.⁷⁰ Vidal engaged directly with this line of thought in his essay on Suetonius. Through his interpretation of this cultural legacy he explained how the rule of a Caesar was of renewed threat in the television age.

The review 'Robert Graves and the Twelve Caesars' is the first in a series of three essays that focus on dictatorship. Vidal is concerned with Suetonius' conclusion that power is an end in itself. To understand the presidency, he argued, it is essential to grasp this point. This was, furthermore, imperative in an age that tended to deny "certain dark constants of human behaviour." He continued that

it is difficult to find a reputable historian who will acknowledge the crude fact that a Franklin Roosevelt, say, wanted to be President merely to wield power, to be famed and to be feared. To learn this fact one must wade through a sea of evasions: history as sociology, leaders as teachers, bland benevolence as a motive force, when finally power *is* an end in itself, and the instinctive urge to prevail the most important single human trait, the necessary force without which no city was built, no city destroyed.⁷¹

In his analysis, politics is the desire for power cloaked by rhetoric. Vidal therefore maintained that to understand the leader of a given country it is necessary to recognise the yearning for power, and to measure the "evasions" against it. To understand Roosevelt as an heir to the Caesars rather than as an idealistic crusader would be to recognise how the desire for power determined the direction of his presidency. Vidal endorsed such a reading on the grounds that to underplay the role

⁶⁹ There is some confusion, at least in Vidal's mind, over the history of this essay. In the 'Author's Note,' *United States*, Vidal wrote that the essay was written in 1952. The earliest it could have been written was 1957.

⁷⁰ Clinton Rossiter, *The American Presidency* (1956), 119, 60.

⁷¹ 'The Twelve Caesars,' *US*, 527.

of the individual in history would be to render American society vulnerable to the idealistic rhetoric of a Caesar and incapable of recognising him as such.

In *Messiah* Vidal played with the idea that in an age defined by anxiety the potential for the institution of a Caesarean authority was strong. This demand, however, resulted not in the rule of a Caesar but in the security of the Eisenhower era. The essay on Suetonius is, as a result, founded on a series of assumptions that are illustrative of how Vidal understood the interaction between the government and the electorate. As a product of the Roosevelt era, Vidal understood that the political character of the nation was determined by the office of the president. There was for him either a controlling Roosevelt or a deputising Eisenhower, either a strong president or a weak administration. Thus if the presidency could be held accountable for the decline of politics and literature in the 1950s, it could, by definition, be a fountainhead for its revival. This is why he understood Kennedy to be an alternative to both conformity and Caesarism: he would measure the desires of the people against the principle of exceptionalism. Nevertheless, the Caesarism Vidal warned against throughout the 1960 election campaign he in effect advocated in his celebration of Kennedy. He endorsed a redistribution of power within the federal government that had its antecedents not in the Constitution, nor his Populist heritage, but in the history of the twentieth century-presidency. Furthermore, in using this standard, the rule of a Caesar could be the only viable alternative to the politics of the Eisenhower era.

Vidal's contribution to the debate over Caesarism was therefore essentially a debate over the power of the Executive to both lead and to symbolise the nation within the geopolitical framework of the Cold War. He argued throughout the election campaign that as Eisenhower had narcotised the country so Kennedy could inspire it to the greater heights that the times required. "What he will accomplish,"

Vidal wrote, “depends largely upon his ability to rally the bored and cynical Western World, to fire the imagination of a generation taught never to think of ‘we’ but only of ‘I.’ ”⁷² In this estimation, the president must of necessity be a master of public relations, and, through this medium, define the nation of which he would be the representative voice. This is a view of the presidency ripe for the television-age Caesarism warned against first in *Messiah*, and second in the essay on Suetonius. It is also very much a twentieth century understanding of the interrelation of the presidency and the media over and above the various branches of government.

The office of the president first towered over the Congress in the Twentieth Century under the twenty-sixth president, Theodore Roosevelt (1901-1909). Roosevelt dramatically increased the status and authority of the president through his consistent place in the headline news.⁷³ He was a master of the public relations machine, and, the historian Marcus Cunliffe wrote, “the first president to treat the entire press corps as an auxiliary federal information service.”⁷⁴ Nevertheless, as Clinton Rossiter observed, there was no domestic or foreign policy crisis throughout his presidency which enabled him to institute that power.⁷⁵ It was not until the presidency of Franklin Roosevelt, and the political crisis inaugurated by the Depression, that the primacy of the Executive office was institutionalised. As a result, Godfrey Hodgson wrote in his study of the modern presidency, *All Things to All Men*, Roosevelt was therein “the model of what a president ought to be,” and in moulding the Executive office to consolidate his notion of power he “left behind a legacy of expectations that have never been fulfilled.”⁷⁶ “[W]hat Roosevelt created,” Hodgson continued,

⁷² ‘Kennedy,’ *US*, 803.

⁷³ Rossiter, *American Presidency*, 70.

⁷⁴ Marcus Cunliffe, *American Presidents and the Presidency*, 1969 (London, 1972), 213.

⁷⁵ Rossiter, *American Presidency*, 77.

⁷⁶ Godfrey Hodgson, *All Things to All Men*, revised edition (London, 1984), 47

was not a bureaucracy at all, but an inspired mish-mash of programmes, agencies, bureaux, and freelance troubleshooters . . . The whole shambling mess was ingeniously arranged in such a way that the frontiers of every agency's jurisdiction would overlap, so that each was in constant competition with its neighbours. The result, which was by no means accidental, was that the White House could retain day-to-day control of a machine which, had it been more properly constructed, must have developed a momentum of its own.⁷⁷

Roosevelt created a bureaucratic system that he could oversee and therefore control. Consequently he, and not Congress, would command the necessary information to be released through the press corps and would therefore define how informed the public were. This is the type of control for which Vidal praised Kennedy, who represented a return to the conception of power developed under Roosevelt and an endorsement of his bureaucratic Caesarism.

In his assessment of Kennedy, Vidal concluded that the only possible way for the federal government to *function effectively* would be under the unqualified rule of a strong president. With the Roosevelt scholar Schlesinger on the team, the Kennedy think-tank was directly informed by this legacy. In *A Thousand Days* Schlesinger praised the Kennedy presidency as a return to the idea of Executive power first exercised by FDR. As with the other academics liberated from their ivory tower by the Kennedy publicity machine, Schlesinger was eager to please, and by invoking the ghost of FDR he authenticated the power Kennedy demanded of the presidency. He recalled that Kennedy had praised the "fluid administrative methods" Schlesinger had written about in *The Coming of the New Deal*, the second volume in his trilogy *The Age of Roosevelt*. "He was determined to be a strong president," Schlesinger consequently noted, "and this meant for him, I believe, a President in the manner of Franklin Roosevelt."⁷⁸ In line with the think-tank Vidal ignored the implications he had previously outlined in the critique of Roosevelt in his essay on *The Twelve Caesars* and endorsed this strategy.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 55.

⁷⁸ Schlesinger, *Thousand Days*, 117.

It is therefore clear that by 1960, Vidal had abandoned his grandfather's stand against the bureaucratic organisation of government and accepted that advanced by the government and the media from the 1930s onward. Caesarism on the order of Roosevelt was the only way that Vidal could conceive of effective government. Nevertheless, the principles for which Kennedy stood allowed Vidal to circumvent its more dangerous implications. In the essay 'The Future of Conservatism' Vidal pressed the point that those to be feared were not the liberals but the reactionaries. (This was written to be published alongside an essay on the future of Liberalism by William F. Buckley, Jr.) "In free elections in reasonably serene times," Vidal wrote, "the reactionary has no chance at the polls. But these are not serene times." He cited a recent poll of high school students published in the *Scientific American* which showed how Caesarism was a real danger in an ill-informed society.

Sixty percent believe police and other groups should have the power to ban or censor books and movies. . . . Forty-nine percent believe that 'a large mass of people' are not capable of determining what is and what is not good for them. Fifty-eight percent believe that the police and the F.B.I. should have the right to give a prisoner the third degree.

Under such circumstances, Vidal argued, the danger of a dictatorship would not be from the Left, such as Sinclair Lewis suggested in *It Can't Happen Here*, but from the Right. This rule would be founded on an uninformed electorate, whose prejudices would be exploited by a demagogue, and not the informed, who would be supporters of a leader such as Kennedy. Vidal thus stated that unlike the political Right, who "mistrust and dislike the majority," the liberal represented the tradition of the Constitution, of "We, the people."⁷⁹ Within this tradition a strong Kennedy in control of the media machine would not therefore represent a Caesarean threat.

⁷⁹ 'The Future of Conservatism,' *Rocking the Boat*, 97, 97-98, 99. (Associated Press, June 10, 1961.)

Moreover, it is important to recognise that Vidal did not equate Kennedy with the political Left, but with the more conservative tradition of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. Contrary to Buckley, who maintained that students had turned to Right because they had been awakened to “the great Nothingness of Liberalism,” and followed with the line that liberalism practised “tyranny” in “making the state the overriding social entrepreneur,”⁸⁰ Vidal argued that there was no operative Left in the United States. He wrote that the political system was divided between the conservative, who would uphold the Constitution, and the reactionary, who would rescind “all human services” in order to allow him “complete freedom to get as much money as possible with no interference from the government.” The reactionary, Vidal continued, had an unreal sense of the geopolitical role of contemporary America. The longed for return to a mythic America in which big government did not play a part was irrelevant to the 1960s. “If we are to remain a great power, we will have to spend uncomfortable amounts on armaments and foreign aid,” Vidal stated. “Taxes will remain great. Government will always be large, no matter who is at the White House.”⁸¹ Nevertheless, Vidal maintained, what the reactionary in effect wanted was not to represent any majority but to institute a dictatorship that would overthrow the Revolution by taking advantage of an ill-educated electorate. Contrary to this, the liberal Kennedy was an advocate of the Constitution and therefore an endorsement of American exceptionalism.

⁸⁰ William F. Buckley, Jr. ‘Conservative Fires Salvo at Liberals,’ *North Carolina News and Observer*, December 10, 1961, Section III, 1.

⁸¹ ‘The Future of Conservatism,’ *Rocking the Boat*, 96.

In the third essay on the threat of the Caesar, 'Barry Goldwater: A Chat,' Vidal returned to the medium of television, and furthered his argument on how a Right-wing dictatorship could establish itself in the United States. He stated that Goldwater was an exemplary candidate for the distinctive type of American dictator he envisaged, and isolated three traits that would define this Caesar. In the first instance he would appeal to the extremists, as Goldwater had. The John Birch Society, for one, supported him and he had not repudiated them. Second he would "oversimplify some difficult but vital issue, putting himself on the side of the majority." Again, Vidal continued, Goldwater was an ideal candidate. "[G]etting 'tough' with the Russians is fine and getting rid of the income tax is fine, too," Vidal wrote of two major issues Goldwater put forward, "but toughness costs money; where will it come from?" The third point, however, is the crucial sociological point. An American Caesar

would not resemble the folk idea of a dictator. He would not be an hysteric like Hitler. Rather, he would be just plain folks, a regular guy, warm and sincere, and while he was amusing us on television stormtroopers would gather in the streets.

For an American Caesar to win power through the democratic system, it would be essential that he master the medium of television. A politician on the order of Hitler could not assume power in a country where the primary medium for his rise would be an instrument so prosaic. He would have to appeal not to the grand passions but to the prejudices of a domestic consumer environment. Goldwater was ideal, Vidal argued, because he was the charming folksy performer who in simplifying many issues had "real appeal for a nation which is not at all certain about its future either as a society or as a world power." He was therefore antithetical to the informed presidency based on the sound principles Vidal advocated.

Following the article on Goldwater, Jason Epstein, Vidal's future editor at Random House, suggested that perhaps he would consider writing a series of political articles about the nature of leadership. "The problem of course is not whether Goldwater is right or wrong about farm supports or whether he has been consistent or not in the various positions he holds," Epstein wrote, "but that he is inadequate as a man to the complex tasks of government and would be no matter what views he held."⁸² Vidal's response is instructive. Yet again he praises Kennedy for having "as nearly a perfect temperament for President as we have ever had," and argues that the failure of leadership is the result of "the inadequacy of our system."

Now we come to the issue: the alternative: can this sort of Republic survive? Is it worth fighting for? Is there an alternative suitable for our own people? Only through contemplating some such alternative either desired or detested could a study of our political men have any relevance, other than gossip. Like most satirists I am reactionary: I like the old republic, repelled though I am by many of its manifestations now. I see Caesarism as the alternative, and I cannot make up my mind whether this is a good thing (in my bones I know that it is bad). Yet under good Caesars we might enjoy a Pax Americana without too much limiting of individual freedom. But under bad Caesars . . . well, we know what to fear.⁸³

Vidal's thinking is throughout this period wrenched by such contradictions. He praised democracy and the ultimate rule of "We, the People" and yet he craved the security of Caesarism. He endorsed the democracy of the republic yet advocated the imperialism of a Pax Americana. He is both egalitarian and totalitarian, still torn by the ideological contradictions established in his mind throughout the 1930s. This letter is nevertheless a clear indication of why he applauded Kennedy's control of executive power and why he censured those he saw as the would-be Caesars of the Right wing.

⁸² Jason Epstein to Gore Vidal, June 2, 1961, GVC, Box 16, Folder 1.

⁸³ Letter to Jason Epstein, June 1961, GVC, M97-209, Box 2, Folder 17, 24.

The understanding that there could be a good Caesar is the central theme to the chapters of *Julian* (1964) Vidal had written in 1959. (These chapters were published in 1962 as *Julian the Apostate*, a novel in progress.)⁸⁴ In this fragment, Julian is the exemplary good Caesar (and Augustus), both educated and intellectual, yet with a firm grip on the machinery of power. There is a notable analogy between *Julian the Apostate* and the 1950s. In the opening paragraph, the beginning of a letter from Julian's teacher Libanius to his associate Priscus, the reign of Theodosius seventeen years after the death of Julian is described as a time of intolerance. Theodosius, as with Julian's predecessor Constantius, had converted to Christianity, a force against which Julian actively fought. "[N]ot only has he become a Christian," Libanius writes, "he has declared us heretic and liable to punishment. Philosophy is to be outlawed and all worship of the true gods abandoned." The critic James Tatum noted that the "conflict between pagan values and Christian intolerance transfers from the first Rome, where it began, to the second, so that a story about the fourth century becomes a parable for the twentieth."⁸⁵ Furthermore, the understanding that, above all, Americans must be on guard against the enemy within was characteristic of the Eisenhower era. As the president Eisenhower personified this course of action. As with Theodosius this policy was, of course, politically expedient. The pressure of the McCarthy hysteria made it so. Thus, as Libanius wrote of Theodosius, he was not apt "to do anything one way or another which is not politically expedient."⁸⁶ This is not to rule but it is to follow, and this is precisely what Vidal criticises the Eisenhower era for. In an allegorical reading he described an irresolute political arena mirrored by an irresolute nation bewitched by the religion of anti-Communism.

⁸⁴ *Julian the Apostate* was published in June 1962 in the collected volume *Three*, along with *Williwaw* and *A Thirsty Evil*. It incorporated material that in the final version of *Julian* is to be found in the first two chapters, and the final chapters, in which Julian recounts the reasons for the military expedition toward Ctesphion in Arabia.

⁸⁵ James Tatum, 'The Romanitas of Gore Vidal,' *Writer Against the Grain*, ed. Jay Parini (London, 1991), 214.

⁸⁶ *Julian the Apostate*, 235, 236.

The capacity of the Caesar to govern over and above the demands of the politically expedient is a core issue in *Julian the Apostate*. As with the United States, the structure of power within the Roman empire was increasingly more centralised. Julian argues that this had made the emperor effectively a figurehead, remote from the execution of power. This isolation of the emperor, a legacy of the rule of Diocletian, made of them “in effect, if not in title, Asiatic kings, like those of Persia, remote from the vulgar, to be displayed only on rare occasions like gilded effigies of gods.”⁸⁷ Julian observes that the nature of empire itself made a figurehead of the Roman emperor. With an empire so organised the capacity of the emperor to execute power was lost to the bureaucracy. Julian proposed to return the emperor to the centre of power and to reorganise the bureaucracy. He would therefore be able to rule under his own edict, and eradicate the administration of Christianity throughout the empire.

The parallels are few but instructive. Kennedy was anti-Communist, but, as far as Vidal understood, he did promise the return to an age of ideas informed by the doctrine of exceptionalism. (As a Catholic he was also, to a certain extent, a challenge to the Puritan establishment.) Consequently, at this stage, Julian is in many ways like the Kennedy Vidal supported. He is foremost a philosopher who has an innate ability to lead. Educated in the classics of Western civilisation his mission is to revive an era which existed before the conformity of Christianity descended on the Roman empire.

How can the Galileans claim there is but one god (or three in one) when there are so obviously many gods and many powers and ideas blazing in Heaven, all emanating from the One; yet the One which holds us all, that made Zeus and Hermes, Mithras and even the Nazarene, has so obviously thrust multiplicity on us that to deny the powers, essences, ideas, stars, is to exclude what the eyes see and the heart knows in the interest of but one cult, and that a variant of the Most High God of the Jews... oh, it is madness!⁸⁸

⁸⁷ Ibid, 257.

⁸⁸ Ibid, 268. Ellipsis in original.

Julian proposed a return to diversity and multiplicity. In promising a return to the philosophy of the old republic, Kennedy equalled this proposal. He would therefore dispel the conformity, the death-in-life, of the '50s. Vidal found the ideal proactive intellectual politician in Julian, and then in Kennedy.

The dissident politics of *Washington, D.C.*

Gore Vidal believed the presidency of John F. Kennedy would deliver a golden age. He saw Kennedy as “a writer *manqué*,” and understood that he would use his erudition to restore the tenets of exceptionalism to government.¹ Yet what Vidal came to understand was that the bureaucratic Caesarism Kennedy practised ruled out such a restoration. He soon perceived Kennedy to be the opportunistic ruler he had warned of in his 1960 election campaign. “Our political leaders want to sell us an image, not a man,” Vidal observed of a political process under the aegis of television. “And it may very well be that our next president will turn out to be some sort of opportunist who, meaning nothing in himself, can project the popular image desired at any given moment: shifting from role to role like an actor.”² As a response to this disappointment, Vidal wrote the political novel *Washington, D.C.*. In it he endeavoured to look back at his political heritage, and at the ideological contradictions conceived in childhood. The novel, which spans the years 1937 to 1954, is an indictment of how the media, from FDR to JFK, had been used as a tool in the political and economic expansion of an empire that only undermined the promise of a golden age.

¹ *Palimpsest* (London, 1995), 368.

² Unidentified speech, GVC, Box 10, Folder 6.

There were two instances in 1961 that led Vidal to revoke his support of the Kennedy administration. First, the failure of the invasion at the Bay of Pigs in Cuba caused him to tone down his grand vision of the Kennedy promise. In a letter to British Labour Party politician, Tom Driberg, he described his “pre-Cuba” essay on Kennedy “euphoric but accurate.” He added that Kennedy’s problems were the result of a “reactionary Congress,” and “an electorate that is more muddle-headed than usual.” Therefore “[i]t won’t be a time of dramatic leadership socially; but I am optimistic, in a very small way.”³ The fault, in other words, was not with the strong leader he praised but with the democratic system that restrained him. Second, Vidal criticised the FBI in the article ‘Closing the Civilization Gap,’ published in *Esquire*, August 1961. This brought him into conflict with the new Attorney General, Robert Kennedy.

The article responded to what Vidal termed the rousing toward “a greater purpose, national and private” invited by the Kennedy leadership. He first endorsed John F. Kennedy’s “exhortations to self-sacrifice,” and the duty of the citizen to be vigilant in defence of his civil liberties. He then catalogued such two instances of police brutality against which the civilian should be vigilant. The first was an event Vidal witnessed, wherein four policemen beat up two men they had arrested in a Washington YMCA. (He does not state what they were arrested for, but considering the venue one can assume it was homosexual conduct.) After eliciting the name of one of the detectives he telephoned the night editor at the *Washington Post* and gave details of the event. “But,” Vidal wrote, “that was the end of it.” He continued that

³ Letter to Tom Driberg, nd, 1961, GVC, M97-209, Box 2, Folder 17, 24. As Arthur Schlesinger noted, many of the Democrats in Congress were anti-New Deal conservatives and Southerners. Kennedy could not therefore rely on their support. *A Thousand Days* (1965), 650-651. It is to this Vidal is referring.

on returning to New York he read of a Southern editor who had cited the FBI in a criticism of the John Birch Society.

Some hours *before* the editorial was published, two men from the F.B.I. arrived at the editor's office and asked him on what authority he could quote the F.B.I. as terming the Birch Society "irresponsible." The editor's sources, as it turned out, were not reliable. But then the editor, quite naturally, asked how it was the F.B.I. knew the contents of his editorial before it was published. He got no answer.

Vidal argued that the point to each story was that the abuse of civil liberties was a danger at the local as well as the federal level. He advocated the establishment of committees of appeal to hear of such cases, "or consider infractions of our freedom to speak out in the pursuit of what our founders termed happiness."⁴ Vidal thus placed the event firmly within the Kennedy rhetoric: he linked it first to the call for a greater sense of national purpose, and second to the idea of the exceptionalist state.

The publication of this article led to a row with Robert Kennedy which brought Vidal's association with the administration to an end. The criticism was consistent with the Kennedy rhetoric, and as a contributor to the think-tank Vidal expected that his observations would yield results. At a White House function in November 1961, Vidal confronted Robert Kennedy. "He said it was none of my business. I said I could make it, or anything else, my business and in the most public way. 'You... a *writer*?' He was scornful. Kennedys *bought* writers."⁵ Although there were no other witnesses, the story circulated was that they had argued because Vidal "had taken a sexual liberty" with Jackie Kennedy, and that "Bobby had defended her virtue."⁶ Truman Capote repeated a version he claimed was told to him by Jackie's sister, Lee, ^{Radziwill} "Bobby and Arthur Schlesinger, I believe it was, and one of the guards, just picked Gore up and threw him out into Pennsylvania Avenue. That's when he

⁴ Reprinted as 'Police Brutality,' *US*, 554, 556, 557. (*Esquire*, August 1961.)

⁵ *Palimpsest*, 394.

⁶ From a deposition prepared for counsel in the Vidal vs Capote libel suit, November 17, 1975, GVC, MCHC79-058, Box 2, Folder 7.

began to write all those cruel pieces on the Kennedys.”⁷ Such gossip undermined the credibility of Vidal’s criticisms of the Kennedys. Instead of a political issue, the attacks could be read as unmitigated acts of revenge. The event nevertheless marked an end to Vidal’s place within the inner circle, and revealed that, once again, he had been dealing with a complex propaganda machine. This enabled Vidal to view the administration with an objective discrimination that had hitherto been lacking.⁸

BEYOND EXCEPTIONALISM IN *WASHINGTON, D.C.*

The end of Vidal’s romance with the Kennedy clan signalled a decisive change in his politics. Until this breach the idea of exceptionalism and the promise of a Pax Americana determined by and large how he understood American politics. In fact, Vidal subsequently noted that as a politician his ideas were depressingly conventional. In a 1976 letter to Judith Halfpenny he wrote, “I did not have a single political idea more interesting than those now lodged in the heads of Ford, T. Kennedy, and so on. The ideas came after I had worked out of my system the urgent need to be the prime mover.”⁹ Furthermore, in the final chapter of *Palimpsest*, he wrote that after 1964 he was “to become more intensely political than I was in my conventional youth.”¹⁰ The end of his fellowship in the Kennedy think-tank gave him the political freedom to scrutinise the New Frontier beyond the rhetoric of exceptionalism. From this vantage point he mapped a genealogy for the relationship between the Caesarean politics of pragmatism and idea of an American exceptionalism in the political novel *Washington, D.C.*.

⁷ Interview in *Playgirl*, ‘Truman Capote Talks About His Crowd,’ September 1975.

⁸ For a more detailed discussion of the events see appendix II.

⁹ Letter to Judy Halfpenny, nd, 1976, GVC, M97-209, Box 2, Folder 17, 42. In addition, Vidal noted in the 1961 introduction to *Rocking the Boat* (1963) that politically he was neither a liberal nor a conservative, but “a correctionist. If something is wrong in society, it must be fixed.” (*Rocking the Boat*, xi. This foreword is dated 10 October, 1961.) This is quite simply a restatement of pragmatism.

¹⁰ *Palimpsest*. 419.

Washington, D.C. was published in February 1967. It followed Vidal's return to the novel with the publication of *Julian* in 1964. In writing *Julian*, Vidal cultivated an understanding of the nature of empire, and started on his new career as a revisionist historian.¹¹ In then writing about the birth of the American empire he registered a decisive change in his political thought. The narrative of *Washington, D.C.* spans the years from Roosevelt's battle with the Supreme Court in 1937 through to the downfall of Joseph McCarthy in 1954.¹² It charts the conversion of the republic to a global empire from the fractious isolationism of the 1930s to the war in Korea. Through this conversion Vidal demonstrates that empire was a consequence of the increased power wielded by the president. From Roosevelt's challenge to the constitutional balance of government through to the Truman Doctrine, Vidal describes how the rhetoric of exceptionalism could be manipulated to serve political ends.

The foundation for this critique is the fictional story of the decline of Senator Burden Day, and the rise of his assistant, Clay Overbury. Day represents the political thought of T.P. Gore whereas Overbury represents that of John F. Kennedy. The contrast between the two men, and their relationship to the idea of exceptionalism, provides the genealogy for a political era founded on the primacy of the media. In *Washington, D.C.* Vidal would use his social and political background to write a devastating analysis of how, in his lifetime, the United States became an empire ruled by the principle of money. "We are simply materialists," he argued in a 1963 essay, and "not bent on setting fire to the earth as a matter of holy principle." The

¹¹ See Donald E. Pease, 'America and the Vidal Chronicles,' *Writer Against the Grain*, ed. Jay Parini (London, 1992), 258-259.

¹² There is some confusion over these dates. In the 1993 reissue *Narratives of a Golden Age*, the sequence is dated 1776 to 1952. Likewise on the dust-jacket of the 1967 Heinemann edition the dates given for *Washington, D.C.* are 1937 to 1952. In actual fact the final chapter can be dated 1954 from the reference to McCarthy's attack on the Army, and the imminent censure "after four years of national distress" (London, 1967, 294).

meaning of the Cold War was not that of the “Red or Dead absolutes” voiced in the press and on television, but an issue of who could make what money where.¹³ The result questioned the orthodox representation of the Cold War and argued that the official rhetoric of state was a smokescreen. It signalled a crisis in Vidal’s politics that led him to reject the idea of the golden age, and, consequently, to examine the ideological conflict that engendered his belief in such an age.

Vidal started *Washington, D.C.* in 1962. When he was roughly a third of the way through the first draft of *Julian*, he wrote what were to become the first three sections of chapter one.¹⁴ The manuscript is dated from May 8 to June 7.¹⁵ In a letter to his cousin, Louis Auchincloss, Vidal recounted that the novel had “at last started to emerge after years of thought and trepidation.” He outlined the projected reach of the work as

Five characters 1937-1950, the death of the Old Republic, the beginning of the Caesars, the corruption of money evenly buttered on everything as opposed to the old corruption which was clottier, more vivid in contrasts.¹⁶

The plan of the novel at this early stage, Vidal acknowledged, was fairly inexact, and anchored only by “a few set actions.” It is nevertheless clear from this description that it would explore the primary themes of his political essays. At the centre of the 1962 draft (and indeed the published edition) is as an interpretation of how the power of the Executive increased under the aegis of the New Deal. The argument is centred

¹³ ‘Nasser’s Egypt,’ *US*, 1230-1231. (*Esquire*, October 1963.)

¹⁴ The manuscript of *Julian* is resumed a third of the way through chapter seven. It is dated June 23, 1962. The third section of *Washington, D.C.* finishes with Enid saying to Clay and Harold, “Come on in here, the party’s started,” 40. This final entry is dated June 7, 1962.

¹⁵ The manuscript held in the archive is typed with corrections written by hand. It is standard practice for Vidal to write the first draft of his fictional work longhand, to have this typed, and then correct it. There is no handwritten draft in the archive.

¹⁶ ‘Just Between Cousins,’ Letters of Gore Vidal and Louis Auchincloss, ed. Fred Kaplan, *The New Yorker*, 9 June 1997, 78.

on the repercussions of Roosevelt's attempt to enlarge the Supreme Court and thereby inaugurate judges sympathetic to the New Deal. In order to study the political ramifications of this milestone event, Vidal initiated the action of the novel on July 22, 1937, at a party held to celebrate the defeat of the court-packing bill. This action, set a crucial juncture in the nation's political history, provided a starting point from which to parallel the decline of the old Republic with the decline of the fictional senator, James Burden Day.

At the beginning of the novel, both the Republic and the career of Senator Day are intact.¹⁷ The victory speech delivered by Day is a definition of Republic's political system. He states that in the defeat of the court-packing bill the Senate had demonstrated to the President the sacred character of the checks and balances written into the Constitution. Day explains that in his opposition to the bill, he aimed to uphold the current regulation of power within the three branches of government. Politically, Day recalled T.P. Gore, and represented a link to the Populist understanding of the federal government. In a time when the power of the Executive was unquestioned, Vidal turned to this heritage as a source of political dissidence. "I think our kind of government is the best ever devised. At least originally," Day states. "So whenever a President draws too much power to himself, the Congress must stop him by restoring the balance."¹⁸ Day concludes that for the president to dictate the agenda of Congress, and demand that it sanction the reform of an obstructive Court, displayed a clear disregard for that balance. The strong leader is therefore incompatible with the very tenets of the exceptional political system.

Day argues that the pragmatic Roosevelt represented a threat to the Constitutional character of American government. In this he echoes the 1930s

¹⁷ From the first through to the fifth draft, James Burden Day is called James Champion Day.

¹⁸ *Washington, D.C.* (London, 1967), 10. Herein *WDC*.

teachings of T.P. Gore. The organisation of the New Deal, Day continues, illustrated this wider point. Roosevelt “has no master plan,” Day reasons, but “all his improvisations, all his gestures are those of a man who wants to center power in himself.”¹⁹ Day indicates how the New Deal would undermine the American experiment in government. He demonstrates why the concentration of power in the White House represented a deviation from the idea of federal government instituted by the Founding Fathers. Under Roosevelt, Day therefore goes on to explain, “the Executive has grown stronger, while the Legislature and the Judiciary grow weaker.”²⁰ The victory over the court-packing bill is important because it reiterated the laws on which the political system was founded. Roosevelt represented a threat to the stability of the system through an unconstitutional centralisation of power.

Nevertheless, Roosevelt established his first administration on the understanding that an extensive revision of federal responsibility was sanctioned by the failure of the conservative Hoover to counter the economic crisis. “If I read the temper of our people correctly,” he stated in his inaugural address, “we now realize as we have never realized before, our interdependence on each other.”²¹ This extension of government control, founded on the landslide election result of 1932, gave rise to the ideological conflict with the Supreme Court. The New Deal centred economic and political power in the Executive branch. In *The Coming of the New Deal*, Arthur Schlesinger wrote that in the first two years of his administration, Roosevelt

deliberately organized—or disorganized—his system of command to insure that important decisions were passed to the top. . . . no other method could so reliably insure that in a large bureaucracy filled

¹⁹ WDC, 9.

²⁰ Ibid, 10.

²¹ Franklin D. Roosevelt, First Inaugural Address, 4 March 1933. *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt* (Volume Two, *The Year of Crisis, 1933*), ed. Samuel I. Rosenman, (London, 1938), 14.

with ambitious men eager for power the decisions, and the power to make them, would remain with the President.²²

Vidal's fictional Senator Day argues that as a consequence of the New Deal, Roosevelt inaugurated an unconstitutional delegation of power within the three branches of government. The conflict with the Supreme Court characterised the fundamental conflict between Roosevelt's flexible interpretation of the Constitution, and a Court allegiant to the principle of limited intervention. He argued that Roosevelt had used the economic crisis to instigate what was in effect a dictatorship.

When the Supreme Court invalidated the National Recovery Administration in 1935 it did so on the grounds that it represented "an unconstitutional delegation of legislative power." "It is not the province of the Court to consider the economic advantages or disadvantages of such a centralised system," Chief Justice ^{Charles Evans} Hughes maintained. "It is sufficient to say that the Federal Constitution does not provide for it."²³ Roosevelt argued in contrast to the Court that the federal government retained a capacity to resolve the challenge of "one-third of a nation ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished" which far exceeded that of unrestricted capitalism. To effectively succeed, he argued, it would of necessity exercise "practical controls over blind economic forces and blindly selfish men."²⁴ In taking the oath for a second term, he invoked the powers of a government designed to "promote the general welfare and secure the blessing of liberty" for the people.²⁵ On February 5, 1937, Roosevelt announced to Congress his plan for the reorganisation of the judiciary. Central to this modernisation was a reorganisation of the Supreme Court, "in order that it may

²² Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Age of Roosevelt: The Coming of the New Deal* (1938), 527-528.

²³ 'Schechter Poultry Corporation v. US,' *Builders of American Institutions*, eds. Frank Freidel and Norman Pollack, (Chicago, 1963), 471, 470.

²⁴ Franklin D. Roosevelt, *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt* (Volume Four, *The Court Disapproves*, 1935.), ed. Samuel I. Rosenman, (London, 1938), 5, 1.

²⁵ Franklin D. Roosevelt, *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt* (1937 Volume), ed. Samuel I. Rosenman (London, 1941), 2.

function in accord with modern necessities.” The present Court, he maintained, was burdened by a disproportionate number of judges over the age of seventy. The rejection of 717 out of 867 petitions for review in the previous year was cited as an indication of its current burden. Thus for reasons of efficiency, and increasing the capacity of the Court to deal with current necessities, Roosevelt recommended the appointment of a new judge to match each one over the age of seventy.

The use of this strategy underlined Vidal’s interpretation that Roosevelt practiced bureaucratic Caesarism. Throughout the first draft, and indeed the published version, Vidal is concerned with the correlation between the private desire for power and the legitimate exercise of that power within the confines of the Constitution. For Senator Day, empowered by the Constitutional justification to challenge the President, the court-packing bill epitomises Roosevelt’s singular longing for power. Day argues that the New Deal did not observe a master plan because it was an exercise in improvisation. To accuse Roosevelt of dictatorial ambition would therefore be too simplistic. “I do see him as more helpless than most people think,” he concedes. “I see him riding the whirlwind.”²⁶ However, the pragmatic course this demanded challenged the Constitutional form of government. The concentration of power in the Executive office, Day continued, was an inescapable feature of the New Deal. The Senate Judiciary Committee in fact rejected the bill as “a violation of the spirit of the American Constitution” for “its employment would permit alteration of the Constitution without the people’s consent or approval.”²⁷ In this opening chapter, Vidal outlined the Senate understanding that in prioritising both his demands and the pragmatism of the new politics, Roosevelt endangered the balance of power fundamental to the Constitution. When stripped of

²⁶ WDC, 10.

²⁷ ‘Report of the Senate Judiciary Committee on Supreme Court Reform, June 7, 1937,’ reprinted in *Great Issues in American History: From Reconstruction to Present Day, 1864-1981*, eds. Richard Hofstadter and Beatrice K. Hofstadter (1982), 368.

its rhetorical defence, the mandate used to justify a reorganisation of the Court was seen as a blatant exercise of power characteristic of Roosevelt diplomacy.

In the first draft, moreover, Day “saw Roosevelt as simply another Caesar, to be stopped.”²⁸ To kill the dictator in the shell he invoked the balance of powers. This is a definitive sign that Vidal had rejected the power exercised by Kennedy. Through returning to a critical juncture in the history of the presidency, he provided an historical commentary on the increase of Executive power. By measuring it not against a pragmatism animated by the language of exceptionalism, but against the substance of the Constitution, Vidal proposed a genealogy for the current presidency. In tracing this back to Roosevelt, furthermore, he engaged with the work of the think-tank. In 1956 Clinton Rossiter wrote that in creating the Executive Office, Roosevelt had converted “the Presidency into an instrument of twentieth-century government.” He continued that this “may yet be judged to have saved the Presidency from paralysis and the Constitution from radical amendment.”²⁹ The think-tank, like Kennedy himself, subsequently focused on the capacity of the president to wield the power of this office. In the introduction to *Presidential Power* (which, Schlesinger observed, supported Kennedy’s “predilections toward a fluid presidency”)³⁰ Richard Neustadt described his work as a meditation on “personal power and its politics: what it is, how to get it, how to keep it, how to use it.” The book was ideal for the pragmatism Kennedy espoused for it was not about “legal powers” but the problem of “how to be on top in fact as well as name.”³¹ Neustadt praised Roosevelt for having “wanted power for its own sake” as well as for “what it could achieve. The challenge and the fun of power,” he qualified, “lay not just in having, but in doing.” In *Washington, D.C.*, conversely, Vidal sought to balance this

²⁸ ‘Washington, D.C.’ first draft, 12, GVC, Box 55, Folder 1.

²⁹ Clinton Rossiter, *The American Presidency* (1956), 104.

³⁰ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *A Thousand Days* (1965), 123.

³¹ Richard E. Neustadt, *Presidential Power: the politics of leadership* (1960). (In this edition the pages in the preface are not numbered. The quotations are from the first page.)

interpretation by returning to the original model of government as defined in the Constitution.

THE RULING CLASS AND THE POWER OF THE MEDIA

Underlying the victory celebration in the first chapter of *Washington, D.C.* is an analysis of how power is distributed within the ruling class and how an adherence to the Constitution served the ends of that class. Vidal demonstrates that for the politician, the endorsement of both the ruling class and the establishment media is a prerequisite if one is to achieve recognition on the national scale. He therefore represents the capacity of the *Washington Tribune* to wield a power over and above that of the politician as the decisive factor in Day's victory. Vidal indicates that through his ownership of the *Tribune*, Blaise Sanford is the force behind this. The relationship between the two key players is founded on Sanford's ability to define the issue within the public domain and to furnish Day with the necessary publicity. Day's statement "of all the lives I can think of, politics is the most... *humiliating*" is therefore the coda for the significance of this victory. He describes government as a profession that invariably divests the individual politician of autonomy. Conversely, the defeat of the court-packing bill, and the subsequent carnival, offered Day an antidote to the frequent humiliation of his profession. "[T]oday is an extraordinary day for me," he explains to Sanford's teenage son, Peter. "I've actually managed to do something I thought important. I proved a point." In addition he advises Peter that if he is interested in politics "publishing the *Washington Tribune* is a good way to be political, without pain."³² The power of the publisher, he concedes, far surpasses that of the individual politician.

³² *WDC*, 11-12, 12.

In his consideration of Caesarean ambitions, Vidal does not therefore confine himself to Roosevelt. He subjects the self-proclaimed guardians of the Constitution to the same analysis. The first character introduced as a Caesar is not Roosevelt, but the newspaper magnate Sanford, who, the narrative states, “had the ambition of a Caesar.” Nevertheless, “his political style unfortunately was that of a Coriolanus. Too fierce and proud to show his wounds in the market-place, he was forced to seek the same world elsewhere.” The biography continues that, to resolve this, he “bought a moribund newspaper, the *Washington Tribune*, and made it a success, largely because he was fearless where those of less income tend to be timid.” Using the *Tribune* Sanford became “a power in politics.” As a result political dignitaries flocked to his mansion to “become, if briefly, a part of that magic circle which was true centre.”³³ Through this arrangement Vidal describes how the distribution of power works: the representatives of the federal government were dependent on the endorsement of the rich to achieve a degree of power within their own field.

As far as Sanford is concerned, the Roosevelt New Deal represented a threat to the distribution of power within the ruling class. Underlying the defence of the Constitution in the opening scene is a power struggle. As a consequence, Vidal demonstrates the parallel between the maintenance of the Constitution and the maintenance of the privileges of the rich. Frederika Sanford epitomises the viewpoint of the moneyed class. Beyond the Constitutional pieties voiced by her husband and Senator Day, she “wanted only for her children to fit with ease into a society she thought exactly right the way it was.” As a result she would entertain “any sort of behaviour as long as it was not openly eccentric or disruptive of what the newspapers called Society.”³⁴ The demand that the social and political system not

³³ Ibid., 4.

³⁴ Ibid., 9, 12.

founder under the weight of the Depression is the main imperative in the opening chapter.

Vidal drew on his own experience in depicting this class. In 1937, two years after his parents were divorced, he was living in the Washington suburbs with his mother and her second husband, Hugh D. Auchincloss. “[M]oney suddenly hedged us all round,” he wrote. “At the height of the Depression there were five servants in the house, *white servants*, a sign of wealth unique for Washington in those years.”³⁵ Vidal modelled the Sanford’s Laurel House on the Auchincloss mansion, Merrywood. He wrote that, under the direction of his society hostess mother, it was engorged “with senators... and the likes of Walter Lippmann and Arthur Krock.”³⁶ Vidal used Merrywood as background for the first chapters of *Washington, D.C.* He methodically reproduced the attitude of a class characterised by “their ferocious anti-Semitism, hatred of the lower orders and fierce will to protect their property from any encroachment.”³⁷ The figure of Auchincloss however was of marginal use, for, Vidal wrote, “*he was unable to do work of any kind.*”³⁸ The character of Blaise Sanford is alternatively drawn from the social enclave of Merrywood and the political domain of the newspaper magnate.

William Randolph Hearst was the one magnate who towered above the newspaper industry in the 1930s. Hearst, who founded his media empire on the rights of the working man, was an ally to T.P. Gore. Although Hearst, like Gore, had supported Roosevelt in 1932, by 1937 he saw the New Deal as a threat to the freedoms on which he founded his empire. In 1934 he had denounced the NRA for “Nonsensical, Ridiculous, Asinine interference with national and legitimate

³⁵ *Screening History* (London, 1992), 22.

³⁶ ‘Reflections on Glory Reflected,’ *US*, 1253, 1252. (*Threepenny Review*, Spring 1991.)

³⁷ *Views From A Window* (1980), 276. (1969.)

³⁸ ‘Reflections on Glory Reflected,’ *US*, 1252.

industrial development.”³⁹ He likewise opposed the Newspaper Guild, created to improve conditions and job security, on the grounds that journalism was a profession and not a trade. When the federal government endorsed the Guild in 1935, Hearst attacked it as “one of the most vicious pieces of class legislation that could be conceived—un-American to the core.”⁴⁰ His biographer W.A. Swanberg cut through the ideological confusion when he wrote that Hearst would have “opposed anything that might reduce the autocratic control he felt his due.”⁴¹ As with T. P. Gore, Hearst established his reputation as a guardian of the working man. The legislative trend of the New Deal however threatened his power to control events, and thus to all intents and purposes the working man was abandoned. Furthermore, the New Deal violated the established distribution of power within the ruling class. In *Washington, D.C.*, Vidal endeavoured to show how the old order operated, and how it would subsequently re-establish control over the activities of federal government. He concluded that the power struggle engendered by the disruption of the old order was resolved by an endorsement of the system Roosevelt created and the recreation of the republic into an empire.

THE TROUBLE WITH EXCEPTIONALISM

In 1967, Vidal wrote that the motivation for *Washington, D.C.* was “to re-create for myself those dream-like years before the second war when I grew up in Washington.”⁴² Bernard Dick consequently described the imagery of the opening

³⁹ Cited, W.A. Swanberg, *Citizen Hearst*, 1961 (1971), 525. (NYT, September 2, 1934.)

⁴⁰ Cited, *ibid.*, 560. (*San Francisco Examiner*, May 29, 1935.)

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 522. In 1931 however Hearst advocated federal intervention. He proposed that the Depression be controlled through extensive government spending. “Hearst had a recovery plan that did him credit,” W.A. Swanberg wrote, “for it was liberal, economically sound and opposed to the thinking of his fellow millionaires,” 509. He proposed to increase the national debt and increase expenditure on public work in order to increase prosperity, and maintained that the national debt could then be reduced out of this prosperity.

⁴² ‘Gore Vidal tells about *Washington, D.C.*,’ *The Literary Guild Review*, May 1967, 4.

scene as that of “an Eden soon to be dissolved by the forked lightning of war and aggression.” The lightning storm from which Peter Sanford shelters in the pool house, only to discover his sister and an unidentified man making love on a rubber mattress, signalled an end to the Eden of 1937 Washington. “The parallels with the *Book of Genesis* are unmistakable,” Dick noted: “the earthly paradise ended when the serpent entered it, and the tranquillity of isolation ceased when a storm uncoiled like a snake while a modern Adam and Eve were tasting the forbidden fruit.”⁴³ Dick hams this up somewhat, but the point is clear: for Vidal the era before the social and political upheaval of the war *was* a golden age of sorts. The experiment in government defined for him by the teachings of his grandfather held firm, and that political practice was founded on political ideology, as exemplified by the defeat of the Court bill, was therefore indisputable.

In *Washington, D.C.*, the arrival of Clay Overbury into the rich enclave of Laurel House, and his subsequent marriage to Enid Sanford, signalled an end to the stability of the American political system. This paralleled the introduction of John F. Kennedy into the Auchincloss circle on his marriage to Jackie Bouvier (whose mother married Auchincloss after he was divorced from Nina Gore.) Overbury, like Kennedy, observed not the ideological precepts of the system but the media-friendly politics of pragmatism. This approach controverted the exceptionalist idea on which the republic was founded. The rise of his career, furthermore, is concurrent with the inauguration of an empire that spelled the death of the republic.

Viewed simply, this is the scope of the narrative. Senator Day is the unmistakable ‘good-guy’ whose politics embody the philosophy of the Constitution. As far as the narrative is concerned this remains true even when he accepts what is in effect a bribe from the businessman Edgar Nillson to fund his presidential ambitions.

⁴³ Bernard F. Dick, *The Apostate Angel* (1974), 126-127.

In return Day would ensure that his subcommittee would not challenge Nillson's bid to purchase Indian land. "After all," Day reasons, "a defender of the Constitution who had taken a bribe was morally preferable to an unbribed President whose aim was to subvert the Republic."⁴⁴ This defence is weak, but there is ultimately little overt material in the narrative to deny that he is right. What is more, Vidal ultimately safeguards Day from the criticism that he betrayed the Indians. At the conclusion of the novel, Day deliberates on his moral responsibility and recalls that in fact the land sale profited the Indians. "Success story," the narrative concludes: "a bad action with good results."⁴⁵ He is the flawed hero. On the other hand, Clay Overbury is clearly the 'bad-guy.' Vidal is careful to demonstrate that each one of his moves, no matter how honourable it may seem, is calculated.

It is consequently of little wonder that so many critics described *Washington, D.C.* as, in Vidal's shorthand, "a novelized MGM movie."⁴⁶ "It's just shallow enough to look great in wide-screen," Charles Stella wrote in the *Cleveland Press*.⁴⁷ In *The New York Times* Josh Greenfield described Senator Day as "Vidal's contribution to future cinematic law." He maintained that Vidal had created a page turner ripe for cinematic adaptation, and therefore "serious criticism need not apply."⁴⁸ While it is not as straight-forward as the Frank Capra feature, the plot does observe the old Western paradigm of good guy versus bad, the danger of the enemy within, and the superiority of the old system.⁴⁹ Furthermore, it is true that within the terms defined

⁴⁴ WDC, 30.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 289. This has echoes of T.P. Gore's experience with the displaced Indian tribes in Oklahoma. Oklahoma was founded from Indian territory acquired by the federal government. Throughout his career Gore defended the Indians against further exploitation.

⁴⁶ SH, 11.

⁴⁷ Charles Stella, 'Vidal's Politics Lack Credibility,' *Cleveland Press*, May 6, 1967.

⁴⁸ Josh Greenfield, 'A Skeleton in Every Closet,' *NYT Book Review*, April 1967.

⁴⁹ Frank Capra was at his peak throughout the Depression. His trademark of the idealistic hero was first introduced in the 1932 film *American Madness*. This style reached its apotheosis in *Mr Deeds Goes to Town* (1936) and *Mr Smith Goes To Washington* (1939). In the first Gary Cooper is Longfellow Deeds, a simple country man who inherits \$20 million and plans to give it to needy farmers. He proves himself to be far better man than the New York lawyers who try to declare him insane. The same is true in *Mr Smith Goes to Washington*. James Stewart is the simple country man as

by the narrative, the argument of *Washington, D.C.* is straightforward. The decline of Senator Day, a model politician tainted only by his acceptance of a bribe taken for the greater good, and the rise of his pragmatic assistant Clay Overbury, demarcates the significance of the plot. Each character furthermore has an identifiable psychological trait. It is accordingly easy to see how they function within the grand scheme of a narrative that in effect describes little more than an elitist political game.

The reason for this ubiquitous interpretation is the essayistic style Vidal uses to decipher each event. He is somewhat heavy-handed in the essays that punctuate the narrative. Through them he demonstrates precisely how the reader is to interpret each character and each event. This is, moreover, a consistent objection in the reviews. In the *New York Review of Books*, John Thompson wrote that a consequence of the "small essays . . . appended to action and dialogue" is that it "is easy to read, easy to understand. The novel is intelligent, seems to be very knowing about social facts of Washington both public and hidden, as indeed it should be, given Vidal's familiarity with the scene, and yet it is flat."⁵⁰ Likewise, in one of the more intelligent reviews, Wilfrid Sheed wrote that this style undermines the narrative.

[Vidal] seems to have forgotten what you do with the spaces between the dialogue, and has crammed them with he-looked-at-him-sourly's and she-grinned-at-him-crookedly's plus a catty, worldly wise commentary which is clearly coming from some place outside the story and punctures any illusion that any of this is really happening.

Sheed argued that through his use of the essay, Vidal deprives the narrative of any psychological reality. "It is inconceivable that any man of ability has ever gone around thinking, 'I want power'," Sheed continued. "[W]hat he thinks is, 'I want this and I want that,' and from this we deduce that he wants power." The failure of

Senator. He is basically a stooge for the big bosses of his state. When he discovers this he returns honesty to a corrupt Senate.

⁵⁰ John Thompson, 'The Professionals,' *NYRB*, June 15, 1967, 15.

Washington, D.C., he concluded, is that “Vidal has omitted the concrete symbols of emptiness.”⁵¹ I believe Sheed is right, and that Vidal is far too dictatorial. The narrative is so straight-forward in both style and content that it is almost inevitable to conclude that it is a story about the end of a golden age.

Nevertheless, as is evident even in the first scene, there is an underlying tension which disturbs any such linear interpretation. The essays are object lessons to the reader, and are for Vidal himself a corrective to a previously believed idea. Yet at the same time he has no concept of an alternative. *Washington, D.C.* is a complex work because it is structured around an unresolved conflict: while Vidal idealises the republic endorsed by Senator Day he is aware that, through the machinations of the ruling class, the government that is said to be founded on democratic principles is in practice an oligarchy. The unresolved conflict at the centre of *Washington, D.C.* is engendered by Vidal’s reading of the exceptionalist idea in practice. In his criticism of the post-New Deal presidency, Vidal rejected the teachings of the 1930s cinema. In his analysis of the pre-war republic the principle of exceptionalism again founders, for no matter what Senator Day may stand for, the ruling class are regnant. Ultimately, Vidal’s struggle to define the meaning of the American republic collapses under Peter Sanford’s declaration “[w]e all react to the hateful present, even though there was nothing better in the past.” Sanford dismisses the Jeffersonian idealism of James Burden Day and concludes “[t]here never was a golden age.”⁵² The ensuing predicament for Vidal was that he could not find in the teachings of his grandfather an adequate political resource for dissidence. Gore’s stand in the 1930s, and his support from reactionaries such as Hugh D. Auchincloss, meant that he too

⁵¹ Wilfrid Sheed, ‘Affairs of State,’ *Commentary*, September 1967, 93, 94.

⁵² *WDC*, 283, 284. In retrospect, Vidal wrote that the historical series represents the search for a golden age. After writing *Washington, D.C.* he “believed there was an American idea (if not ‘exceptionalism’) worth preserving and so I set out to trace it from 1776 to its final internment in and around 1952.” *Burr* 1973 (1993), viii. This reads too much like a wilful construction after the fact. Nevertheless he does not find this age. See ‘The Legacy of the Property Party’ in chapter 8.

was implicated in the system. The James Champion Day of the 1962 draft thus becomes James Burden Day when Vidal redrafted the novel in 1966.⁵³ It is clear that from 1962 to 1965 Vidal had experienced an odyssey which left him politically much changed and his idea of Senator Gore much diminished. In its complete form he could therefore not find in *Washington, D.C.* a way out of this ideological impasse.

THE RISE OF THE PRAGMATIST

In 1960, Norman Mailer wrote that the election of John F. Kennedy would give rise to “the possibility that the country might be able to finally rise above the deadening verbiage of its issues, its politics, its jargon, and live once again by an image of itself.”⁵⁴ In *Washington, D.C.* Vidal counters this prevailing conception of the Kennedy presidency. Through the character of Clay Overbury he demonstrates how the Kennedy publicity machine worked, and measures the image of America Kennedy claimed to endorse against the social and political realities behind the rhetoric. Vidal’s reading of how this redefined political culture in the new era of television was a challenge^{to} the Kennedy image in the proliferate memoirs published after his assassination in November, 1963. “Since the politics of the Kennedys are so often the work of publicists,” Vidal wrote in 1967, “it is necessary to keep finding out just who they are and what they really mean. If only because should *they* be confused as to the realities of Cuba, say, or Vietnam, then the world’s end is at hand.”⁵⁵ With the possibility of the opportunistic Robert Kennedy running for the presidency in 1968, the aim of *Washington, D.C.* is to demythologise the Kennedy

⁵³ Vidal did not change his name to Burden until the fifth draft. In the typescript Burden is added in pen, and Champion deleted. GVC, ‘Washington, D.C.,’ 5th draft, Box 57, Folder 6. The typescripts are not dated.

⁵⁴ Norman Mailer, ‘Superman Comes to the Supermarket,’ *The Presidential Papers* (London, 1964), 58. (*Esquire*, October 1960.) See appendix I for an extended discussion of how Mailer and Vidal understood Kennedy in 1960.

⁵⁵ ‘The Holy Family,’ *US*, 825. (*Esquire*, April 1967.)

style of pragmatism and to demonstrate why it was, and through Robert Kennedy could be again, such a political threat in the era of the Cold War.⁵⁶

Vidal returned to the manuscript of *Washington, D.C.* on April 8, 1965. At this point Lyndon Johnson had been president for 16 months. The war in Vietnam, a war Vidal understood to be a product of the Kennedy presidency, had developed into an official conflict.⁵⁷ Johnson repeated the standard justification that American intervention was in defence of freedom. “We want nothing for ourselves,” Johnson declared, “only that the people of South Viet-Nam be allowed to guide their country in their own way.” As with the Truman Doctrine, Johnson affirmed that the war represented an extension of the American dream. “[N]o nation need ever fear that we desire their land, or to impose our will, or to dictate their institutions,” he continued. “For our generation has a dream. It is a very old dream . . . we have the power, and now we have the opportunity to make that dream come true.”⁵⁸ In terms of rhetoric, Johnson was safeguarded from the accusation of imperialist intent by the understanding that the aim of the war was an extension of exceptionalism. Such tautological rhetoric was the target of *Washington, D.C.*. Through his critique of the Roosevelt presidency, Vidal reached toward the conclusion that the political system had foundered under the strains of empire. Furthermore, in demythologising the Kennedy image in the form of Clay Overbury he also demythologised the imperialist heritage of the Roosevelt era. Vidal achieved this through his particular understanding of how the United States is ruled, and the function of the media as a conduit for the predilections of the ruling class.

⁵⁶ Furthermore, Vidal liked John but disliked Robert Kennedy. He was the unacceptable face of Kennedy tactics.

⁵⁷ In the essay ‘The Holy Family,’ Vidal wrote that “[t]he mythmakers have obscured the fact that it was JFK who began our active participation in the war when, in 1961, he added to the six hundred American observers the first of a gradual buildup of American troops, which reached twenty thousand by the time of his assassination. And there is no evidence that he would not have persisted in that war, for, as he said to a friend shortly before he died, ‘I have to go all the way with this one.’ ” *US*, 818.

⁵⁸ Lyndon Johnson, ‘Lyndon B. Johnson Explains Why Americans Fight in Vietnam, 1965,’ *Major Problems in the History of the Vietnam War*, ed. Robert McMahon (Lexington, 1995), 211, 213.

The progressive erosion of the American experiment in government is measured through the character of Clay Overbury. In the first chapter he is a constant figure in the background. He is defined through his position as assistant to Senator Day: he was employed after he responded to an ad that called for “an energetic young lawyer on the make to charm Senators, small salary, large prospects.”⁵⁹ The narrative centres on Day throughout the first chapter, and Overbury is present to furnish the pragmatic judgement. Vidal uses his pragmatism to mark the distinction between the two characters. The principles on which each one based his political career serves as commentary on the decline of the republic and the rise of an empire Vidal believed to be founded not on ideology but on the self-serving doctrine of pragmatism.

To introduce the social and political implications of the pragmatic heritage, Vidal raises the question of money. Money is the primary concern on which the entire narrative hinges. Day’s part in the victory over the Court bill puts him in the running for president for it makes a name for him in certain circles. Money, he concludes, “is the one thing that can stop us.”

Clay shook his head. ‘The fat cats love you.’

‘Today. But maybe not tomorrow. After all, no one can be conservative enough for them and ...’

‘... and be elected President.’ Clay spoke almost too quickly. But he was right.

‘And be elected President. But no one can be President . . . I can’t be President . . . without their help. That’s the problem.’⁶⁰

This “problem” is the core of the plot, and the antithesis between Day and Overbury. Yet again, Vidal is more interested in the elitist game of politics than in the political problems raised by the Depression. The argument is theoretical, and hardly an

⁵⁹ *WDC*, 36.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 22-23.

endorsement of "We, the people." Furthermore, Vidal's answer is, in effect, that to destroy Caesar one has to become Caesar. Nevertheless, the ideological questions that punctuate the narrative throughout the first section of chapter one are for nothing if the predilections of the ruling class are not served by the political system. Therefore in emphasising Day's need for money Vidal indicates how the balance of power between the politician and the businessman was to change when the iron law of the Constitution was twisted to serve pragmatic ends.

To add to the imagery of the serpent in the garden of Eden, Vidal introduces the businessman Edgar Nillson. In answer to his apparent need for money, Nillson offers Day what he terms "a legitimate exchange."⁶¹ The Senate subcommittee of which Day was a head would not object to Nillson's purchase of a section of Indian land and in turn the Day for President Committee would be founded with Nillson's money.

Vidal founds the plot on this moral dilemma because it provides an ideological standard against which the characters can be measured. Day worries over his commitment to the Constitution, and eventually accepts the bribe because, as he reasons, "one played the game according to the rules or not at all." Nevertheless, in 1939 he was "[t]o the conservative press . . . the only statesman capable of preserving the Constitution while keeping the peace." In other words, Day served the isolationism of the ruling class and magnates such as Hearst. At the same time, although his conscience plagued him, he is protected by his resolution that "a defender of the Constitution who had taken a bribe was morally preferable to an unbribed President whose aim was to subvert the Republic."⁶² This is no different than the uses to which Johnson put the doctrine of exceptionalism to justify the war

⁶¹ Ibid., 28.

⁶² Ibid., 89, 30.

in Vietnam. In fact, by 1965, Johnson (who was well known for accepting bribes) is also a useful model for Day for he too was a Southern populist turned corrupt. Furthermore, as Donald E. Pease noted, the bribe “implicates Senator Day in the actual imperial history—the United States’ appropriation of Indian lands—he has opposed.”⁶³ It is this history of appropriation that enabled T. P. Gore to found a career in Oklahoma politics and assume a seat in the Senate. Nevertheless, Vidal is searching for an answer to the political chaos of the 1960s through the character of Day. He therefore reserves his harshest and most outright criticism for the John and Robert Kennedy prototype, Clay Overbury.⁶⁴

Washington, D.C. covers seventeen years, and there is invariably the space of a few years between each chapter. After Vidal finished chapter one, and rounded off the set-piece he began with the victory of James Burden Day, he returned to the story in 1939. In the first chapter Clay had worked his way into the rich enclave of Laurel House. In the second he is at war with his wife Enid, the daughter of Blaise Sanford. There are a proliferation of plots and subplots throughout, but the focus starts to shift from Day to Overbury. Whereas in the first chapter Day is compatible with the times (at least within the circles of the ruling class) in the second this compatibility is the reserve of Overbury. Thus in response to yet another lecture delivered by Senator Day on the dictatorial ambitions of Roosevelt, Overbury suggests “perhaps he’s closer to the way people are now.”

⁶³ Donald E. Pease, ‘America and the Vidal Chronicles,’ *Writer Against the Grain*, ed. Jay Parini (London, 1992), 267.

⁶⁴ It is possible to read even more into this. As the heir to his older brother, it was conceivable in 1965 that Robert Kennedy would oppose Johnson in the 1968 election. Vidal therefore represented him as a greater threat than Johnson, who at this point was, unlike his predecessor, at least ensuring the passage of Great Society legislation through Congress. (Of course, this is before the lengthy war in Vietnam spelled an end to the Great Society.)

Clay was always practical and Burden wondered if he believed in anything at all. It had been his experience that, contrary to legend, young men are seldom idealistic. They want the prizes and to rise they will do what ever needs doing, echoing faithfully the rhetoric of the day.⁶⁵

Overbury is thus characterised, but, yet again, he is no different from Senator Day. The simple fact is that the rhetoric Day trumpeted in his youth was the rhetoric of the times. "I wanted to nationalize the railroads and smash the trusts," Day recalled of this election to the Senate in 1914. These positions were those of the Progressive movement, and were endorsed by T.P. Gore before he turned conservative in response to the New Deal. Nevertheless, the narrative is comment on a morality play written to deplore "the death of the Old Republic, the beginning of the Caesars."⁶⁶ Overbury is not tempered by ideological commitment. At the inauguration of the empire he is committed not to the Constitution but to the more Caesarean politics of Roosevelt.

The frontier which separates Day from the circle that first honoured him is the war in Europe. Day is committed to the exceptionalist interpretation of the relationship between the New World to the Old circumscribed in the Monroe Doctrine. He therefore "saw no reason for the New World to involve itself once again in the sheer bloodiness of the Old."⁶⁷ Again, the rhetoric of exceptionalism is used as a measure to criticise Roosevelt. In the annals of history, Roosevelt, as Clinton Rossiter wrote, plunged the country "permanently, for America's own sake, into world affairs."⁶⁸ Through Day, Vidal offers an alternative to this interpretation and ultimately redetermines the historical precedents for isolationism. Nevertheless, the shift in the geopolitical balance introduced by the war likewise altered the balance between the Roosevelt government and the magnates. In *Washington, D.C.*

⁶⁵ WDC, 61-62.

⁶⁶ See note 16.

⁶⁷ WDC, 84.

⁶⁸ Rossiter, *The American Presidency*, 120.

Nilsson declares his support for Roosevelt's Lend-Lease policy; and although he at first opposes it, Blaise Sanford is also moved to declare his support. Day protests that it is yet another example of the Executive exerting power outside the confines of the Constitution. "Those bills that have to do with finance—and Lend-Lease is one—must originate first in the House of Representatives," Day lectures his belligerent son-in-law. "At no point does the Constitution allow the Executive to initiate legislation."⁶⁹ Nevertheless, as with the New Deal, legislation issued from the White House throughout the war.

The Executive management of the war changed the relationship between government and the businessmen. The militarisation of the economy spelled an end to the Depression and the reintroduction of the business class into the machinery of government. "The accomplishments of American industry during the war," John Morton Blum wrote, "restored much of the prestige businessmen had lost after 1929."⁷⁰ Vidal reflected this change in *Washington, D.C.* through Overbury's eclipse of Senator Day. Day is opposed to the war, but for the sake of his political career he is forced to concede after the bombing of Pearl Harbor "there are no more isolationists and internationalists. Only . . . Americans."⁷¹ In the context of war, and in particular a war presented as the work of imperialist Japan striking at an isolationist United States, exceptionalism served as a force to underwrite intervention. Its use as a tool *against* the birth of empire therefore proved, as Day demonstrates, ineffectual. The end result of the war was that, as Peter Sanford notes,

Everyone took it for granted that without design and by God's election, the American empire existed to rule the world. Not as if we *wanted* the world, the magnates grumbled, as they seized bases and

⁶⁹ WDC, 97. This was moreover a pressing argument after the passage of the Tonkin Gulf Resolution in August 1964, which enabled the president to authorise defensive action without the need to go to Congress.

⁷⁰ John Morton Blum, *V was for Victory* (1976), 117.

⁷¹ WDC, 122.

trade routes, but who else can stop the Nazis and the Japs? Who else can preserve peace, through war?⁷²

The point is clear. The interests of the industrial class were served by American foreign policy. Isolationism was consequently renounced, and the politicians forged a new rhetoric to maintain the new empire. The support of the ruling class, represented by Nillson and Sanford, therefore shifts to Overbury.

In his representation of the events that led America into the Second World War, Vidal does not follow the conspiracy theories of historians such as Charles A. Beard in *President Roosevelt and the Coming of the War* (1948) or Charles Callan Tansill in *Back Door to War* (1957). Beard and Tansill argued that Roosevelt encouraged the Japanese to attack in order to furnish the pretext for American entry into the war. True to his Populist heritage, Vidal saw the war as the product of a greater conspiracy, that of advanced capitalism. In his criticism of empire Vidal reflects the thinking of Edmund Wilson. In the introduction to *Patriotic Gore*, an analysis of Civil War literature, Wilson notes that having “lived through a couple of world wars and having read a certain amount of history, I am no longer disposed to take very seriously the professions of ‘war aims’ that nations make.”⁷³ Vidal later wrote that what Wilson described in this introduction was “the United States in all its *unexceptionalism*.”⁷⁴ The political rhetoric customarily used to determine the pretext for war, Wilson argued, is merely “the self-assertive sounds” that man “utters when he is fighting and swallowing others.”⁷⁵

⁷² WDC, 163.

⁷³ Edmund Wilson, *Patriotic Gore*, 1962 (1977), xi.

⁷⁴ ‘Edmund Wilson: Nineteenth Century Man,’ *Virgin Islands*, 6. (NYRB, November 4, 1993.)

⁷⁵ Wilson, *Patriotic Gore*, xii.

Such rhetoric, Wilson continued, had previously been used to warrant the aggressive expansionism of the European empires, and under the Cold War was the preserve of the United States.

And now we Americans of the United States, we too the self-congratulatory grandchildren of a successful revolution but driven, also, by the appetite for aggrandisement, have been adding such terms as 'the American dream,' 'the American way of life' and 'the defense of the Free World' to these other forms of warlike cant.

Wilson argued that under the rhetoric used throughout the Cold War, the United States was nothing but an expansionist imperial power in the tradition of old Europe. As with post-revolutionary France and the Soviet Union, America embarked on the process of expansion immediately on driving out the monarchies. In describing the scope of the book "as an objective account of the expansion of the United States," he defined the social importance of such an exercise.

This is the time to think what we are doing because, as soon as a war gets started, few people do any more thinking about anything except demolishing the enemy.⁷⁶

This is a disturbing forecast of the rhetoric used throughout the Vietnam war. It is also instructive as to what end the history in *Washington, D.C.* served. Vidal, like Wilson, outlined a genealogy for imperial expansionism under a doctrine of exceptionalism. In 1967, a time when dissent was marginalised, it was an attempt to dispel the rhetoric through which the war was justified to the American people. The use of anti-communist cant by the government and the compliant media, as Vidal later observed, meant that "in the end, at the word 'Communism,' there is an orgasmic Pavlovian reflex* just as the brain goes dead."⁷⁷ His work, like that of Wilson, is an attempt to pierce the rhetoric and to understand what it masks.

⁷⁶ Ibid., xiii, xxxi, xxxii.

⁷⁷ 'The Last Empire,' *Vanity Fair*, November 1997, 174.

On the publicity circuit for the British reissue of *Messiah*, some five months before the publication of *Washington, D.C.*, Vidal spelled out the link between the inauguration of the empire under Roosevelt and the war in Vietnam. On the BBC2 arts programme 'Late Night Line Up,' Vidal outlined Roosevelt's creation of the empire. "[W]hile mouthing the four freedoms," he stated, Roosevelt "carefully assembled all the bits and pieces of all the empires of the earth about himself." Roosevelt, he argued, applied the same bureaucratic zeal that created the New Deal to create the American empire. The result was a commitment that led to the war in Korea, Joe McCarthy's reign of terror, the tranquillising years of Eisenhower, and the re-energising of the Cold War under Kennedy. He continued that this led to the war in Vietnam.

[W]hen we went into Korea the cold war was very hot, the holy war against Communism was on everybody's tongue. Suddenly out of nowhere comes this thing which nobody was much reading about and we must put this on President Kennedy's head—he got us into it in October '63 when he changed the 600 advisors we had there to 20,000 committed troops.⁷⁸

Vidal maintained that if Kennedy had lived, the war would be the same as it was under Johnson. Furthermore, Kennedy was a product both of imperial history and the media presidency inaugurated by Roosevelt. This system, as Godfrey Hodgson argued, was so developed as to ensure that Roosevelt dominated it. Kennedy did not possess the political genius of Roosevelt, but he could create the right image through the agency of the media. Thus understood, the New Frontier rhetoric that led to war was, as Wilson characterised^{it}, "the self-assertive sounds" one man "utters when he is fighting and swallowing others."⁷⁹ This is important to Vidal's representation of empire and opportunism in an age when the meaning of the Vietnam war was understood through the rhetoric of exceptionalism.

⁷⁸ 'Late Night Line Up,' BBC2, October 7, 1966. From transcript, GVC, Box 79, Folder 3. Vidal statistics are somewhat askew. At the end of 1961 there were 22,000 'advisors' in South Vietnam. This was an increase of 300% since January. Vidal is perhaps separating himself from this because in 1961 he still supported Kennedy.

⁷⁹ Wilson, *Patriotic Gore*, xii.

In *Washington, D.C.*, therefore, Vidal demonstrates how Kennedy was an heir to the Roosevelt era. The consequence of empire was that an ideal president could not be a Constitutionalist, but, instead, a pragmatic strategist who understood how to manipulate the electorate through the mass media. Overbury, like Kennedy, fulfilled this criteria. And thus, rhetoric aside, he admired the power wielded by Roosevelt in his opportunistic creation of the empire. He saw the United States as master of the earth and celebrated the fact that no country was left with the ability to dispute its will. Unlike Day, "he did not regret the passing of the old America." To Overbury, the United States was

just another power whose turn for empire had come, and in that empire he meant to wield power entirely for his own sake. In this he resembled not Burden, the flawed idealist, but the old President who had prevailed by mingling cant with shrewdness in such a way as to inspire his followers and confuse his enemies none of whom quite realized what he was up to until, by dying, it was suddenly plain to all but the totally deluded that the author of the Four Freedoms had managed by force of arms and sly manoeuvring to transform an isolationist republic into what would no doubt be the last empire on earth.⁸⁰

Vidal is unequivocal in his characterisation of Roosevelt and his creation of the empire. This is, however, a clear act of historical revisionism. It is an interpretation Vidal arrived at only after his breach with the Kennedys. Furthermore, one of the first historians to reach such a conclusion was A.J.P. Taylor in the 1965 publication *English History: 1914-1945*. "Of the three men at the top," Taylor wrote, "Roosevelt was the only one who knew what he was doing: he made the United States the greatest power in the world at virtually no cost."⁸¹ Nevertheless, this crucial essay binds Overbury to the tradition Vidal, writing in 1966, understood Roosevelt to have inaugurated. It was, consequently, not necessary for Overbury to believe his own rhetoric. His concern, and likewise that of Roosevelt, was with the manipulation of rhetoric as a means to exercise power. Overbury is representative of the new breed of

⁸⁰ WDC, 203.

⁸¹ A.J.P. Taylor, *English History: 1914-1945* (London, 1965), 577

politician. His opportunism would commit the United States to a Cold War to sustain empire, the military-industrial complex, and his own image.

Clay Overbury proves a matchless politician to serve the magnates in the political and economic renewal of the war. He first surrenders his fight for a seat in the Congress to enlist as a captain in the US army. "A good idea," Nillson responds. "He'll make a better candidate if he's been a soldier, with a good record."⁸² Through the machinations of Blaise Sanford, moreover, he is established as a war hero. The obedient, war-hungry journalist Harold Griffiths is assigned to observe Overbury. He then writes a story describing Overbury's rescue of a man from a burning hangar. The story, which proves to be false, is a deliberate echo of Kennedy's rescue of a man after the PT ship he captained was sunk after colliding with a Japanese destroyer. "Through constant repetition," Vidal wrote, "the simple facts of the story merged into a blurred impression that somehow at some point a unique act of heroism had been committed by Jack Kennedy."⁸³ The event was mined for its propaganda value throughout the various forms of media.

Although it was true that Kennedy did in fact help to rescue a man, Garry Wills concluded that he was probably responsible for the accident in the first place. The PT-109 incident was nevertheless exaggerated to generate good publicity for the Congressional candidate. "Not since Theodore Roosevelt charged up San Juan Hill with two journalists at his side," Wills wrote, "had a military episode been so expertly merchandised for its political value."⁸⁴ In *Washington, D.C.* Vidal mercilessly plays up this exaggeration. "Brave men don't talk much," the former film

⁸² WDC, 126.

⁸³ 'The Holy Family,' *US*, 816.

⁸⁴ Garry Wills, *The Kennedy Imprisonment*, 1982 (1983), 136-137, 138.

critic Griffiths melodramatically writes. "They just get the job done."⁸⁵ His words recall those of Schlesinger in *A Thousand Days*. The rescue, Schlesinger wrote, embodied Kennedy's courage, which was "the courage of men under enemy fire, of men silently suffering pain, the courage of the sailor and the mountain climber and of men who stared down mobs or soared into space."⁸⁶ This courage was the product of an organised, well-funded publicity machine. For Kennedy this machine was financed by his father. For Overbury it was paid for and orchestrated by Blaise Sanford. Vidal's criticism of Overbury, and, by association, Kennedy, escalates from the time of this event.

The politician on the make, served only by the doctrine of pragmatism, is ideal for the magnates enriched by the end to the Depression and the militarised economy. In order to rise he would be dependent on their patronage. Overbury is therefore superlative. He has no quarrel with the disingenuous creation of his image and the ends to which it would serve because he has no social or political code against which his actions are measured. As Vidal wrote of Kennedy in the essay 'The Holy Family,' he was only interested in winning and was therefore ideal to advance the prevailing interests of the day.

Highly paid technicians are able to determine with alarming accuracy just what sort of characteristics the public required at any given moment in a national figure, and with adroit handling a personable candidate can be made to seem whatever the times require. The Kennedys are not of course responsible for applying to politics the techniques of advertizing (the two have always gone hand in hand), but of contemporary politicians . . . the Kennedys alone possess the money to maintain one of the most remarkable self-publicizing machines in the history of advertizing.⁸⁷

This marriage of money and politics without a foundation in the ideology of the republic is what Vidal set out to criticise in *Washington, D.C.*. The threat of the

⁸⁵ WDC, 188.

⁸⁶ Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, 87. This b-movie description is shameless. It was astute of Vidal to have Harold Griffiths as a movie critic before the war and to thus play up Schlesinger's second career of writing movie reviews.

⁸⁷ 'The Holy Family,' *US*, 814.

pragmatism practised by the Kennedys was that it ceased to innovate within the confines of the Constitution but served only the vague notion of what the times require. Clay Overbury epitomises this relationship, and in the creation of his post-war political career, Vidal establishes a theme that would recur throughout his analysis of Cold War politics: the marriage between Washington and Hollywood.

THE MEDIUM IS THE MESSAGE

From his return to Washington, the career of Overbury is stage-managed by a team of publicists employed by Blaise Sanford. The return itself is filmed for the cameras and covered by every newspaper. Overbury's estranged wife Enid, and the practically anachronistic Senator Day, are wheeled out to afford a rounded appearance to this homecoming. Overbury, Vidal qualified, "saw no reason why a politician . . . could not be presented in the same way as a movie star to the public."⁸⁸ Accordingly, the publicity machine, under the direction of seasoned publicist Sanford, worked to maintain his post-war popularity on such terms. The strategy employed after he was elected to the House of Representatives was deliberately premeditated.

Youth was exploited (promise of future greatness) as well as a war record (a film of his wartime adventures was now being made) and physical appearance (whenever he appeared in public, girls would clamour at the photographers' prompting). Yet, as Clay knew, that which begins falsely becomes with constant repetition true.⁸⁹

Overbury is the vehicle for Sanford's Caesarean ambitions, and, meaning nothing in himself, he could achieve power through the application not of principles but his patron's riches. This undermines the idea that the United States is a meritocracy where any man could aspire to be a congressman or even president. Furthermore, it

⁸⁸ WDC, 241.

⁸⁹ WDC, 242.

demonstrated the extent to which the politician was a creature of the industrial class and attendant to their predilections in the post-war peace.

This portrait of Overbury's political career is the dark realisation of a prophecy Vidal made in the 1960 election. Central to his campaign, Vidal had warned against the power of the media to legitimate a candidate who in himself stood for nothing. "Our political leaders want to sell us an image, not a man," he observed. "And it may very well be that our next president will turn out to be some sort of opportunist who, meaning nothing in himself, can project the popular image desired at any given moment: shifting from role to role like an actor."⁹⁰ This fateful prophecy was fulfilled by the Kennedy Vidal endorsed throughout the campaign. In itself this was a testament to the effectiveness of this publicity. Furthermore, as Vidal concluded in 'The Holy Family,' it was eventually clear that Kennedy was successful not necessarily because of *what* he said but the *medium* in which he said it. "If it is true that the medium is the message and television is the coolest of all media," Vidal wrote, "then the televised thirty-fifth President was positively glacial in his effectiveness."⁹¹ This is an incisive rendering of the thesis that the medium is the message.

The dictum "the medium is the message" was coined by the Canadian academic Marshall McLuhan. McLuhan was a commentator on the political revolution exercised by television in the 1960 election. The journalist Philip Deane summarised his views on Kennedy vs. Nixon in *The Toronto Globe and Mail*. McLuhan, he wrote, took the accepted line that Nixon grew more definite as the debates progressed, but, unlike the mainstream press, concluded that this was an aid not to

⁹⁰ Unidentified speech, GVC, Box 10, Folder 6.

⁹¹ 'The Holy Family,' *US*, 815.

Nixon but to Kennedy. He continued that in agreeing with Kennedy on policy, Nixon helped to blur Kennedy's image. "Mr. Kennedy is thus not handicapped by clear cut issues; he is visually a less well-defined image, and appears more nonchalant. He seems less anxious to sell himself than does Mr. Nixon."⁹² In his 1964 book *Understanding Media*, McLuhan made a distinction between his analysis, and that put forward by Theodore White in *The Making of the President 1960*. "White considers the 'content' of the debates and the deportment of the debaters," McLuhan wrote, "but it never occurs to him to ask why TV would inevitably be a disaster for a sharp intense image like Nixon's, and a boon for the blurry, shaggy texture of Kennedy."⁹³ McLuhan's answer is the key to why the medium itself *is* the message.

McLuhan described television as temperately "cool" because it was the ideal medium for the indefinite figure. The first principle in McLuhan's thesis is the theoretical separation of medium and content. The content of any medium, he concluded, is always another medium. For example, the "content of writing is speech, just as the written word is the content of print, and print is the content of the telegraph." The consequent problem for the analyst is that "the 'content' of any medium blinds us to the character of the medium."⁹⁴ Thus in White's analysis of the television debates he scrutinises what was said, and concluded of the debates,

[w]hat they did best was to give the voters of a great democracy a living portrait of two men under stress and let the voters decide, by instinct and emotion, which style of pattern and behaviour under stress they preferred in their leader.⁹⁵

White used the idea of "instinct and emotion" to sidetrack the issue that in the final analysis it was the stance that was more important than what either man said. "The effects of technology," McLuhan wrote, "do not occur at the level of opinions or

⁹² This article is quoted in Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media* (1964), 330.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 329.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁹⁵ Theodore White, *The Making of the President 1960* (1962), 293.

concepts, but alter sense ratios and patterns of perceptions steadily and without resistance.”⁹⁶ Thus understood it was not exactly what Nixon said but his sharp image and hard tone of voice that precluded his success.

McLuhan concluded that television was therefore a temperately “cool” medium because it rejected the sharp personality and, instead, favoured the representation of a process. Unlike radio, the medium through which Nixon was understood to have triumphed in the first debate, television involved the audience. McLuhan wrote that because radio was a medium that easily served as a background it had to significantly heat up to attract attention, thus the popular success of demagogues such as Mussolini and Hitler in the ‘30s. Television, on the other hand, “will not work as a background. It engages you. You have to be *with* it.” Television involved the audience because it represented a process. And so “[i]nstead of the voting bloc,” McLuhan wrote, “we have the icon, the all-inclusive image. Instead of a political viewpoint or platform, we have the inclusive political posture or stance.”⁹⁷ Television altered the political process, McLuhan concluded, because it dispelled the need for a political platform. Through it, the most effective way to represent a political client was to use the rhetoric of advertising, wherein the product facilitated a process. As Vidal would have Myra Breckinridge conclude, “the placing of man in the driver’s seat (courtesy of Hertz) reveals in the most cogent way man’s eternal need for mastery over space and distance.”⁹⁸ In his representation of Clay Overbury, and in his analysis of Kennedy, Vidal demonstrated how this worked.

Vidal makes it clear that Overbury was a star on the order of Hollywood glamour within the more secular medium of television. He embodied the culture of fandom with his more sedate position as Congressman and Senator. He did not

⁹⁶ McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 18.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 312, 321.

⁹⁸ *Myra Breckinridge* (Boston, 1968), 19.

therefore have to *do* anything that would compromise his image. It was enough to rely on the work of the advertising machine. His views were therefore conventional (“increased military spending” and the “ritual alarm” concerning “the predatory Soviet empire as it threatened to dominate Europe”) in that they reflected the concerns of the class that financed him. Vidal thus writes of the year 1950,

[s]o far none had realized that Clay’s dim record was not so much the result of an unzealous temperament as of a conviction that at this moment in the Republic’s history people only wanted to be left alone to watch television and forget the exhausting trials of the recent war. To offer them adventure in their current mood would be disastrous. Later, if necessary, thunder might roll, lightning flash; and Clay had perfect confidence that when that time came he could make whatever weather the bright days of his primacy required.⁹⁹

Vidal makes it clear that Clay was effective on television because he, and the publicity team that conducted his polls, could gauge the mood of the people and act accordingly. Television, as McLuhan theorised, was the medium to cool the electorate down. They were hence served by the glamour of Overbury and his patent unwillingness to rock the boat.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF PETER SANFORD, AND THE CONCLUSION

Washington, D.C. reaches conclusion in 1954, the year of Senator Joseph McCarthy’s censure. The equilibrium set up in the first chapters between Senator Day, Clay Overbury, and the adolescent Peter Sanford, the boy in the lightning storm in the opening paragraph, is significantly reversed. Senator Day has been brought down by the disclosure that he was involved in the land sale to Edgar Nillson. This was the result of a story Harold Griffiths wrote based on information given to him by Overbury. Furthermore, the story is a response to one written by Peter Sanford for the journal *The American Idea*. In the course of his analysis of how advertising

⁹⁹ WDC, 242, 255.

techniques are put to use in contemporary politics, Sanford debunks Overbury's war heroism as a fabrication. Overbury nevertheless weathers the storm, and Day qualifies to the disappointed Peter the significance of his failure: such a story "only confuses people who have already accepted him as what they think he is, a genuine war hero, the subject of an extraordinary amount of publicity. That's all that matters, the first large impression."¹⁰⁰ Day is left behind by this publicity, champion no more; Overbury is not on the make but made; and Peter Sanford is an exile from the political ideas expressed by the principal characters throughout the narrative.

Peter Sanford is of critical importance to the conclusion of the novel. He represents the link between the republican past manifest in the political philosophy of Senator Day and the imperial future realised in the career of Clay Overbury. He is therefore in a position to understand the history of the United States beyond the intellectual confines of political discourse, and the rhetorical tool of exceptionalism. In this he is representative of Gore Vidal.

The biographical link between Vidal and Sanford is evident throughout the novel. He is the boy who in the first chapter is lost in the imaginative worlds of Edgar Rice Burroughs and Hollywood cinema, and confused by the charade played out in the political drawing rooms of his father's mansion. The novel traces his education. Robert Kiernan also noted that Peter shared Vidal's passion for cinema and that the death of Peter's school-friend Scotty recalls the death of Jimmie Trimble.¹⁰¹

The significance of Peter Sanford to the overall structure of the novel does not come into play until it starts to reach toward conclusion. As Senator Day

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 284.

¹⁰¹ Robert Kiernan, *Gore Vidal* (1982), 72-73.

declines, Peter assumes his role as the novel's historian. He provides the coda for the conclusions Vidal reached in the very act of writing it. Thus at the end of the novel the game that so confused him in chapter one is clear: it was, he concludes, "simply, war. A conquers B who conquers C who conquers A. Each in his own way was struggling for precedence and to deny this simple predatoriness was sentimental; to accommodate it was wrong; to change it impossible." Vidal gives Peter a range of superlative lines that serve to define the action. "History is gossip," Peter thought while in the midst of Washington society, "but the trick is to determine which gossip is history." In what is perhaps the definitive comment on McCarthy, he declares that "politics is the only profession in which mediocrities can gain the world's attention through slander."¹⁰² His greater significance however is as a coda for the decline of Senator Day and the rise of Clay Overbury.

The crucial link between Peter Sanford and Vidal is in their disillusionment with the political system. In the key exchange between Sanford and Day at the end of the novel it is impossible for him to endorse the Constitutional system. The subject of Day's discourse is the failure of the system to forestall the arrival of the Caesars. He argued that fundamentally the system was now too big for the government, as it was defined by the Constitution, to function. Legislation was no longer the preserve of Congress: "we receive our legislation already prepared for us, the work of a thousand lawyers in a hundred bureaux." Sanford suggests that the system be abandoned and Day concludes that has already happened: "We now live under a Presidential dictatorship, with periodic referendums which allow us to change the dictator but not the dictatorship." In reaction to Day's subsequent reference to the brief golden age presided over by Jefferson, Sanford concluded that "[t]he apes have always governed us, and our complaints are simply monkey chatter."¹⁰³ For him the

¹⁰² *WDC*, 297, 136, 269..

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 283. The decision to write *Burr*, and to look at the time heralded as a golden age, clearly has its antecedents here.

system of power and tyranny could never have been forestalled by the idealism of the Declaration of Independence or the Constitution. He epitomises Vidal's disillusionment after the failure of the Kennedy enterprise, and amidst the horrors of the Vietnam war. He could not find in his grandfather's teachings or the doctrine of exceptionalism a viable alternative to the current system.

In the final analysis, *Washington, D.C.* is a bleak and damning critique of the evolution of a republic into an empire. It is a harsh commentary on how the political overlords deceived the nation through a publicity machine that used the rhetoric of exceptionalism to disguise what was in practice an authoritarian empire. The political ideals of the early chapters founder under the weight of these conclusions. In the end there is for Day no conceivable future. In light of the fact that his former ally *The Tribune* is to publish the details of his indiscretion with Nillson he is thought to have committed suicide. What really killed him, his daughter Diana concluded, is that "he felt he had to play the game their way and, when he did, was promptly caught."¹⁰⁴ Peter Sanford (the shadowy character of Diana occluded) is isolated at this point as the sole link to the republican past. In the final scene, a party at Laurel House, now sold to a nouveau riche hostess, he is confronted with his effective isolation. Overbury is the political victor. Thus Sanford's former employee Aeneas Duncan, a parody of Norman Mailer, was there to show that he had renounced his socialist past in order to help write a book for Overbury.¹⁰⁵ The substance of the think-tank was thus being assembled. They were, like Duncan and Griffiths, under the spell of Clay Overbury's charm.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 315.

¹⁰⁵ Peter Sanford asks Duncan which of his ideas he would offer: "the similarity between the orgasm and the bomb, the fact that television advertising is the principle cause of cancer?" Ibid., 303. This is an indictment of the psychobabble in the first section of Mailer's 'The White Negro,' *Advertisements for Myself* (London, 1968), 270-271.

In the coda Peter Sanford provides to the whole enterprise, Vidal's disillusionment burns through what he concludes is the self-serving power game of Washington politics. In the end, "what he knew to be the human case" was that

the generations of man come and go and are in eternity no more than bacteria upon a luminous slide, and the fall of a republic or the rise of an empire—so significant to those involved—are not detectable upon the slide even were there an interested eye to behold that steadily proliferating species which would either end in time or, with luck, become something else, since change is the nature of life, and its hope.¹⁰⁶

This conclusion is written out of Vidal's rage against the dissolution of the American dream. It is nevertheless far less damning than the original coda, which was, as far as the manuscripts show, only written at the end of the sixth draft. In this version, following the above paragraph Peter reasoned, "[l]et the beloved—if romanticised—Republic come to an end and the villainous but glorious Caesars come." He looks up at the sky to see the "bright silver bullet of a bomber" head toward "the empire's northern border, the white exhaust making a jagged scar upon the day."¹⁰⁷ As snow starts to fall, the narrative concludes. "It all ended, as it began, in the cold" as Arthur Schlesinger wrote in the final sentence of *A Thousand Days*.¹⁰⁸ The end of the republic and the rise of the Caesars is inscribed by the unequivocal image of the bomber. Ultimately *Washington, D.C.* represents the definitive turning point in Vidal's political thinking, and is fundamental to an understanding of the role he would assume in the aftermath of the Vietnam war.

¹⁰⁶ WDC, 316.

¹⁰⁷ 'Washington, D.C.,' Draft 6, 689-690, GVC, Box 58, Folder 1.

¹⁰⁸ Schlesinger, *Thousand Days*, 940.

***Myra Breckinridge* and the Golden Age of Hollywood Cinema**

On March 25, 1967, a month after the publication of *Washington, D.C.*, Vidal started to write *Myra Breckinridge*. He completed the first draft on April 18. "It wrote itself, as they say," Vidal remarked in 1974.¹ *Myra Breckinridge* is the first of Vidal's iconoclastic "satirical arias," a first-person narrative on the state of the union.² In contrast to the preceding fiction, this distinct form allowed him, as Fred Kaplan wrote, an "imaginative freedom."³ As a novel of ideas, moreover, *Myra Breckinridge* is a philosophical response to the historical impasse reached at the end of *Washington, D.C.*. Yet whereas the analysis of American mythology in *Washington, D.C.* is centred on political ideology, in *Myra Breckinridge* it is centred on Hollywood.

FROM WASHINGTON, D.C. TO MYRA BRECKINRIDGE

Myra Breckinridge is a response to ideas that surface on occasion throughout *Washington, D.C.*. These ideas concern the effect of Hollywood cinema on the political imagination. The columnist Harold Griffiths, in a mirror of the career of Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., is in the early chapters film critic for *The Washington*

¹ *Views from a Window*, 59. (1974.)

² Jay Parini, 'An Interview with Gore Vidal,' *Writer Against the Grain*, ed. Jay Parini (London, 1992), 280.

³ Fred Kaplan, 'Introduction,' *The Essential Gore Vidal* (1999), xxiii.

Tribune.⁴ In this capacity he reaches two conclusions Vidal would explore in *Myra Breckinridge*: first, it is “impossible to see twenty movies a week and not be affected,” and second “[m]ovies are life, after all, with the point made simple.”⁵ In working for Clay Overbury, Griffiths, like Schlesinger, is a member of the audience elevated to the ranks of the supporting cast. His imagination is structured by dreams manufactured in Hollywood, and in his role as political apologist he works to that blueprint. Throughout the war he mirrors the language of Hollywood in his ham copy. His description of Clay Overbury’s heroism is structured according to the cinematic conventions of the autonomous American hero, for as the critic Leo Rosten wrote in 1941, it was within the Hollywood film industry that “romantic individualism, the most compelling idea in American history, reached the apogee of its glory.”⁶ As Schlesinger had achieved this for Kennedy in his role as historian and apologist, so Griffiths achieved it in his role as film critic turned reporter.

Vidal’s principal critique, and the one most important to *Myra Breckinridge*, is that the mythology of the autonomous hero screened by Hollywood proved instrumental to this achievement. The President as hero had uniformly been Schlesinger’s subject. His 1945 publication *The Age of Jackson* and the three-volume *The Age of Roosevelt* (1957-1960) are testament to this critical predilection. Vidal’s correlation of Griffiths and Schlesinger is making the point that, from Roosevelt to Kennedy, Hollywood cinema was instrumental to the foundation of a social philosophy which endorsed the cult of the strong president. The result was that the president’s role as, in George Reedy’s phrase, “the unifying factor that holds us together,” is sealed neither by ideology nor Constitutional precedent but by the

⁴ In *A Thousand Days* (1965), Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. noted that Kennedy was interested in a member of his staff contributing film reviews to the magazine *Show*, and that he assumed that role. Footnote, 612.

⁵ *WDC*, 65, 64.

⁶ Leo C. Rosten, *Hollywood: The Movie Colony, The Movie Makers* (1941), 16.

subliminal influence of popular culture.⁷ To understand the social and political identity of the nation would be therefore to look not at the intricacies of political ideology but at the reach of popular culture itself.

In *Myra Breckinridge* Vidal reasons that the Hollywood cinema screened throughout the Depression and the Second World War proved to be the psychological foundation for the Cold War. In line with *Washington, D.C.* it maintains that the tradition of the autonomous hero endorsed a notion of masculinity which meant, in the aftermath of war, that empire was inevitable. There is, Vidal argues, a link between the idea of masculinity screened in wartime Hollywood cinema and the rhetoric of exceptionalism. Beneath “the self-assertive sounds” of the political rhetoric that man “utters when he is fighting and swallowing others” is a fervent masculinity.⁸ Clay Overbury, therefore, “wanted simply to overwhelm,” which on a personal level led him to seek “power over men through the conquest of their women,” and on a political level led him to empire.⁹ In *Washington, D.C.* Vidal could not find in the history of exceptionalism a way out of the political impasse which had led to an imperial presidency and the war in Vietnam. In *Myra Breckinridge* he demonstrated why a solution could not be found in the political idealism of the cinema screened throughout his youth.

THE PROJECT OF MYRA BRECKINRIDGE

Myra Breckinridge is written in the form of a diary. The narrative, which covers the period of three months from January to April 1967, is a record of Myra’s attempt to “recreate the sexes and save the human race from certain extinction.” The setting is

⁷ George Reedy, *The Twilight of the Presidency*, revised edition (1987), 13.

⁸ Edmund Wilson, *Patriotic Gore*, 1962 (1977), xii.

⁹ *WDC*, 10.

the Academy of Drama and Modelling in Hollywood, California, an institution owned and run by the former “Singin’ Shootin’ Cowboy” Buck Loner, uncle of her late husband Myron.¹⁰ In the year after Myron’s death, and his rebirth as the transsexual Myra, a fact not revealed for over two-thirds of the book, the twenty-seven-year-old Myra descends on the Academy with the express intent of claiming her inheritance of half the property.

Due to its location in Hollywood, “the source of all this century’s legends,” the Academy is a microcosm of the world Myra plans to restructure. It is laden with students whose “fitful, mindless shuffling of roles,” she perceives as characteristic of the current generation. “Mimesis is normal, particularly in youth,” Myra concludes, and she understands the range of characters played out by the students as representative of an age defined by Hollywood and television. Armed with a first-hand history of Golden Age Hollywood cinema, and a reinterpretation of that history in the work of the film-critic Parker Tyler, Myra uses the Academy as the site for the fulfilment of her mission: “*the destruction of the last vestigial traces of traditional manhood in the race in order to realign the sexes, thus reducing population while increasing human happiness and preparing humanity for its next stage.*”¹¹

The Hollywood cinema of 1935 to 1945 is the basis for Myra’s understanding of the characteristics she is out to change. “During those years the entire range of human (which is to say, American) legend was put on film,” she qualifies, “and any profound study of those extraordinary works is bound to make crystal-clear the human condition.” Taking her lead from Parker Tyler’s conclusion that “films are the unconscious expressions of age old human myths,” Myra argues that the visual

¹⁰ *Myra Breckinridge* (Boston, 1968), 7, 12. Herein *MB*. The original title of the novel in its first to third draft was ‘The Academy of Drama and Modelling.’ Vidal replaced it with ‘Hollywood, California.’ He substituted this with the eventual title in the fifth draft.

¹¹ *MB*, 10, 38, 39, 41. The Golden Age of Hollywood is from 1935 to 1945. I have used capitals throughout to distinguish it from Vidal’s post-war golden age.

media of the 1960s is outwith this steadfast rule. For a screened myth to be apposite it has to reflect what Tyler defined in his 1947 book *Magic and Myth of the Movies* as “an imaginative truth,” and embody a “permanent status of possibility.”¹² Myra argues that although the myths at the core of the Golden Age inform the current television generation, they are an anachronism within the social and political conditions of the 60s. With no “struggle to survive or mate” she concludes, all that is left for the contemporary man to do is “to put on clothes reminiscent of a different time.” For Myra, the Hollywood rendition of masculinity screened in the 40s is now irrelevant. In “a society of machines,” she qualifies, the urge “to dominate in traditional ways is bound to end in defeat or frustration.” In light of the overpopulation that resulted from the baby-boom of the post-war years, she maintains that the traditional conception of heterosexuality must be transformed in order to “save the human race from certain extinction.”¹³

Through the often eccentric cultural analyses of Myra Breckinridge, Vidal draws a link between the psychology of masculinity, the history of exceptionalism, and the creation of the American empire. For Myra, the Hollywood cinema of the Golden Age reflected what she understands as the reality of American society throughout the Golden Age. She perceives a “wholeness then” she claims is “lacking” from the “hopelessly fragmented” post-war visual media, and argues that this is entirely because the cinema then was relevant to the needs of the culture.¹⁴ From *Sergeant York* (1941), which fictionalised the conversion of the WW1 veteran Alvin York from pacifist to war hero, to the “masterpiece” *Since You Went Away* (1943),¹⁵ which

¹² Ibid., 13-14. Parker Tyler, *Magic and Myth of the Movies*, 1947 (London, 1971), 27.

¹³ MB, 66, 109, 7.

¹⁴ Ibid., 115.

¹⁵ Ibid., 48. *Sergeant York* is referenced in the paragraph celebrating “the beautiful years of war and sacrifice and Pandro S. Berman films,” MB, 60. All the film references are to actual pictures. This is essential to the historical argument Vidal raises.

critics hailed as “the definitive statement about domestic life during the war”¹⁶ Hollywood outlined how the nation could best deal with the self-sacrifice of war. Furthermore, the conditions of war endorsed a traditional conception of masculinity. As a result, Myra theorises, “American boys created a world empire because they chose to be James Stewart, Clark Gable and William Eythe. By imitating godlike autonomous men, our boys were able to defeat Hitler, Mussolini and Tojo.”¹⁷

For Myra, the “wholeness” of the Golden Age was determined by the fact that Hollywood furnished the role models which, in this case, enabled “American boys” to win the war. Her conclusion that the 1960s are “hopelessly fragmented” in comparison is the foundation for Vidal’s critique of the social and political power exercised by Hollywood. The role models for the ‘60s generation, Myra writes, are, “by and large, debasing.” They are for her but a pale shadow of an age long gone. “Are the private eyes and denatured cowboys enough to serve as imperial exemplars?” she asks. “No.” For Myra, the autonomous masculinity of the James Stewart, Clark Gable and William Eythe heroes epitomised the *idea* of America. 1960s man, on the contrary, is nothing more than male subjectivity in drag. She therefore cannot see the war in Vietnam as anything more than “our leaders working instinctively toward” a reduction in the world’s population.¹⁸ Myra is, moreover, the product of an era that understood the Second World War to promise an extension of the American idea. Through her conclusions, Vidal demonstrates that Hollywood prepared the country for the geopolitical role the war occasioned.

Like *Washington, D.C.* the focus of *Myra Breckinridge* is on the unresolved conflict between the perceived Eden of the pre-war years and the crisis of faith concerning the veracity of this Eden that Vidal experienced in the ‘60s. Myra is a

¹⁶Clayton R. Koppes and Gregory D. Black, *Hollywood Goes To War* (1987), 60.

¹⁷ *MB*, 39.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 115, 39, 145.

product of the *idea* of America screened by Hollywood. Although at the age of twenty-seven she is historically outwith the Golden Age, as a devotee of its cinema she is an illustration of how it came to define an historical era. "I am intellectually devoted to the idea of the old America," she writes. "I believe in justice, I want redress for all wrongs done, I want the good life—if such a thing exists—accessible to all."¹⁹ Although Myra argues that the values of this age are no longer relevant in the social and political context of the '60s, she predicates her conclusions on the authenticity of such an age, and in so doing protects the idea of pre-war America as a cultural Eden. For Vidal, this past is a fiction. For Myra it is truth no longer. In an endeavour to demythologise the pre-war era, Vidal uses the transsexuality of Myra Breckinridge to demonstrate that this truth is nothing more than a cultural fiction.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PARKER TYLER'S *MAGIC AND MYTH OF THE MOVIES*

The foundation for this analysis is Vidal's understanding that the history of modern America is rooted in a mythology given form by Hollywood cinema. It is the power of myth over the imagination, and consequently over American culture, in which Vidal is interested. In the 1974 essay 'American Plastic: The Matter of Fiction,' he wrote of Greek myths that although they are useful to those brought up on the classics, "they are of no real use to Americans born this century." Such myths, he maintained, are no longer "part of the racial memory, the common stock of all our dreams and narratives."²⁰ In *Myra Breckinridge* Vidal demonstrated that the myths which inform contemporary dreams are in fact furnished by Hollywood, "the source," as Myra writes, "of all this century's legends."²¹

¹⁹ Ibid., 40-41.

²⁰ 'American Plastic: The Matter of Fiction, *US*, 136. (*NYRB*, July 15, 1974.)

²¹ *MB*, 10.

To understand the power of Hollywood over the imagination, Vidal equipped Myra with a critical apparatus to assess the nature of its mythology. This apparatus is both derived from, and an invective against, Parker Tyler's book of film criticism, *Magic and Myth of the Movies*. Tyler founded the often fantastic criticism in this book on his understanding that "the true field of the movies is not *art* but *myth*." He stated that

[a]ssuredly a myth is fiction, and this is its bare link with art, but a myth is specifically a free, unharnessed fiction, a basic prototypic pattern capable of many variations and distortions, many betrayals and disguises, even though it remains *imaginative* truth.

As a prototypic fiction, he maintained, myth is not found in the deliberate language of art but in the unfettered language of the imagination for it realises a common unconscious truth. "[T]he gods and goddesses of Hollywood," Tyler wrote, are as such "modern vestiges of the old Greek divinities." He qualified that because "man is his past, the past of his race, and all the beliefs he ever held," the Hollywood myth serves to give form to an imaginative belief in much the same way as it did in ancient Greece.²²

Tyler illustrated his thesis, which applied the teachings of Freud, Jung, and J.G. Frazer to Hollywood cinema, by contrasting two myths in the history of Western thought. The first is that man once believed the earth to be flat. "Today," Tyler elucidates, "this is a purely ornamental myth; it has died because imagining the earth is flat has no relation to our desires or employments." The second is the story of Diana, goddess of the moon and the hunt. The myth of Diana "might be considered a decorative myth," he added, but "like so many legends it holds a mesmeric appeal for the mind." Diana represents the figure of the woman resistant to love; "and yet according to the legend Endymion made her lose her heart; that is, the man lived who

²² Tyler, *Magic and Myth*, 26.

could break down her defences merely through his sexual image.” The myth that the earth is flat, he continued, is not consistent with the facts and therefore redundant; the myth of Diana is on the other hand an imaginative truth, for it promises that what “was true once may become true again.” Tyler argued that the “essence of myth also has the permanent status of possibility,” and that “*desires* may have the same power over the mind and behaviour, indeed a much greater power, than *facts*.” He concluded that “myth is not, as a psychological or historical nucleus of fact, necessarily to be judged as true or false, illusory or real, according to its specific labels, its historic status, its literal beliefs. Essentially myths are not factual but symbolic. I assume that movies are essentially likewise.”²³ Thus understood, the cinema is nothing less than the articulation of the dreams of mankind. Tyler maintained that through giving such dreams form, Hollywood demonstrates that they are in fact an attainable goal.

Vidal uses this criticism to represent the shadow-line between the conservative Myron and his rebirth as the avenging Myra. At the psychological root of this transformation is the fact that Myron’s homosexual experience is inconsistent with the mythology of the silver screen for it is not represented as an attainable goal within Hollywood iconography. “Myron and I,” Myra writes of the 1950s, “were, despite our youth, a throwback to the Forties.” Her identity as an individual is first and foremost the product of Myron’s desire to conform to these strictures. As a result Myron could only conceive of homosexuality within a specific, if mythical, heterosexual terminology: he “wanted men to possess him,” and “saw himself as a woman made to suffer at the hands of some insensitive man.”²⁴ For Myron, the object of the transsexual operation was to be physically compatible with the iconography depicted on the silver screen, and to emerge from the homosexual

²³ Ibid., 27, 28.

²⁴ MB, 59, 91.

underground to become part of this heterosexual orthodoxy. Thus as the critic John Mitzel wrote, without Tyler, Myron would have been “information without criticism, observation without analysis, a queen without a queendom.”²⁵ It is through Tyler, and his reading of the 1940 film *Turnabout*, that Myron is able to envision a way to become part of the Hollywood mythology.²⁶

Turnabout is the story of a husband and wife who are granted their wish for a reversal of their respective roles. The result is that the husband, Tyler writes, “becomes the incarnation of that compulsiveness toward feminine mannerisms, gestures, and vocal habits that characterize a certain type of homosexual,” whereas the wife “blooms into the horsiest type of female.” He then concludes that what this act realises is “an ancient magical belief in the guise of modern make-believe,” and as such it raises the question of its overall significance within the mythological order.

How can we account for certain homosexual illusions of identity unless we assume that by imitating the female the male believes that he becomes the female, thus automatically and unconsciously practising the imitative variety of sympathetic magic?²⁷

Tyler leaves behind the simple domestic plot of *Turnabout* to state that within the terms of Hollywood mythology, homosexuality can only surface as an identity housed in the wrong body. Such “sympathetic magic” can only therefore be realised within the confines of heterosexuality. Taking his lead from this, Myron crosses this line to “make magic real.” Consistent with his belief that one must live “in accordance with one’s essential nature,” he is reborn through surgical technology to become Myra Breckinridge.²⁸

²⁵ John Mitzel, ‘Patriarchy vs. “Pornography.” some notes on myra b,’ John Mitzel and Stephen Abbot, *Myra and Gore* (Dorchester, Massachusetts, 1974), 24.

²⁶ In the text of *MB*, 240, *Turnabout* is wrongly dated 1937.

²⁷ Tyler, *Magic and Myth*, 99.

²⁸ *MB*, 241, 104.

Myra's identity is, therefore, a composite of the cinema Myron watched during his childhood. In the first pages of her diary, she invokes this iconography in order to give "an exact, literal sense of what it is like, from moment to moment, to be me."²⁹ As a woman she is fashioned from "that magic world which was occupied my waking thoughts for twenty years." Her "careful low-pitched voice," is "modelled on that of the late Ann Sheridan," her "sweet tone like that of Irene Dunne in *The White Cliffs of Dover*," her whisper like that of "Phyllis Thaxter in *Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo*."³⁰ As Tyler wrote, the "essence of myth also has the permanent status of possibility," and that "*desires* may have the same power over the mind and behaviour, indeed a much greater power, than *facts*."³¹ Nevertheless, whereas Myra is at once the literal realisation of that desire, in making the dream real she is a caricature of its restrictions. In order to conform to Hollywood iconography, she invalidates the accepted biological confines of heterosexuality. As a transsexual she politicises Tyler's theoretical reflections in showing that the manifestation of heterosexuality in Hollywood is a fiction.

Throughout *Myra Breckinridge* Vidal constructs a political tool from the critical thesis Tyler outlined in *Magic and Myth of the Movies*. Although he said he "used to read [Tyler's] criticism and howl," Vidal extracts from it the blueprint for a comprehensive explanation of Hollywood's cultural impact.³² Vidal as much as confirmed this when I asked him what he made of the 1971 preface to *Magic and Myth of the Movies*, in which Tyler described Vidal as one of his "agreeing readers," and wrote of *Myra Breckinridge* "[a]ll these years this man has never forgotten my

²⁹ Ibid., 5, 10.

³⁰ Ibid., 13, 100, 138

³¹ Tyler, *Magic and Myth*, 27.

³² Cited, Bernard F. Dick, *The Apostate Angel* (1974), 144. Vidal does not say when he was reading Tyler. He did know of him in the 1940s and in fact met Tyler at a party in 1947 (*Palimpsest*, 114; Kaplan, *Vidal*, 212-213.) As an avid movie fan it is probable he did read Tyler then. There is certainly a case for arguing that if Vidal was buying the arm-chair psychology of Anaïs Nin at that time he was a good audience for Tyler's often bizarre criticism.

books and the impression they made, and it's true, he's hit on a Tyleresque idea!"³³ Vidal answered that "he may be camping around a bit, and turning it around in his favour; that he's got the joke, or, really, the back of the joke, which is a very serious statement."³⁴ The serious statement at the back of the joke is that the unstated beliefs of Western culture are given tangible form by the visual media. Written in an era marked by social and political crisis, *Myra Breckinridge* is, like *Washington, D.C.*, a work that aims to question the foundations on which American culture is built. The character of Myra is, as a homosexual man reconstructed to mirror Hollywood iconography, an indictment of the understanding that there was a Golden Age before the war whose return would neutralise the current crisis. As "an attempt to break out of the maze of paradoxes we do not even dare call an ethical system," which is how Vidal described the novel to Louis Auchincloss, *Myra Breckinridge* is a call to look beyond the mythology of the United States if a new society is ever to be created.³⁵

THE MYTHOLOGY OF THE FRONTIER AND THE GOLDEN AGE OF HOLLYWOOD CINEMA

The tradition of the autonomous hero and his role in the history of American exceptionalism is at the centre of Hollywood idealism. Throughout the Depression, Leo Rosten wrote in 1941, Hollywood ensured that the mythology of the individual "reached the apogee of its glory." "To Americans raised in the American tradition, faithful to the American concept of unbounded personal achievement," he concluded, "Hollywood is the last frontier."³⁶ It was throughout the Depression that *the* American myth, the myth of the frontier, was reconstructed by the New Deal and

³³ Tyler, *Magic and Myth*, 11, 9.

³⁴ Christopher Bryant, interview with Gore Vidal, October 7, 1997. "Of course," Vidal added, "his interpretations were foolish." Nevertheless, Vidal's criticism of Tyler is directed at his conclusions, and not the premise on which such conclusions were founded.

³⁵ Letter to Louis Auchincloss, 1968, *The New Yorker*, June 9, 1997, 84.

³⁶ Rosten, *Hollywood*, 16.

Hollywood cinema. Roosevelt invoked its spirit in his first inaugural address. "Nature still offers her bounty and human efforts have multiplied it," he stated. "Plenty is at our doorstep, but a generous use of it languishes in the very sight of the supply."³⁷ The popular fear occasioned by the Depression had in fact been informed by the need of a frontier. "As the depression ground past its third year," Eric F. Goldman wrote, people asked if "the America of bountiful opportunity" would ever reappear, and if the nation could "escape the consequences of the final settlement of the West."³⁸ Roosevelt therefore argued that the solution to the Depression would be an end to the "[p]ractices of unscrupulous money changers," and the return of the land to the people.³⁹ So envisioned, the New Deal spoke for the reconstruction of a frontier Frederick Jackson Turner had declared formally closed in 1890.

For Turner, the frontier had hitherto characterised American history. In the 1893 address that made his name, he argued that the continual regeneration of social and political ideas defined America.

American social development has been continually beginning over again on the frontier. This perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating American character.⁴⁰

The idea of a frontier was moreover integral to the foundation of the American political system. As Thomas Jefferson wrote in 1787,

³⁷ Franklin D. Roosevelt, First Inaugural Address, 4 March 1933, *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt* (Volume Two, *The Year of Crisis, 1933*), ed. Samuel I. Rosenman, (London, 1938), 11.

³⁸ Eric F. Goldman, *Rendezvous with Destiny* (1953), 321.

³⁹ Roosevelt, First Inaugural Address, 12.

⁴⁰ Frederick Jackson Turner, 'The Significance of the Frontier in American History,' *The Frontier in American History* 1920 (1962), 2-3.

I think our governments will remain virtuous for many centuries; as long as they are chiefly agricultural; and this will be as long as there are vacant lands in any part of America. When they get piled upon one another in large cities, as in Europe, they will be as corrupt as in Europe.⁴¹

Jefferson defined the land as, in the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson, “the appointed remedy” to the corruption of the city.⁴² It was to the land, and to the idea of the frontier, that Roosevelt therefore appealed in 1933. He declared that the “money changer” of the city had been cast “from the temple of our civilization,” and that the nation would be returned “to the ancient truths.”⁴³ This reconstruction of the frontier was undertaken through the rhetoric of the New Deal, and through Hollywood, the most contemporary of American institutions.

It was under the Roosevelt administration that Hollywood was redefined as the last frontier. The result was, as Myra intoned, an era in which “the Depression, World War II, and the national innocence . . . made it possible for Pandro S. Berman and a host of others to decorate the screens of tens of thousands of movie theatres with perfect dreams.”⁴⁴ For this to take effect the “national innocence” had to be purged of the city and returned “to the ancient truths” of the frontier. This achievement was the result of an endeavour that in fact began eleven years before the inauguration of Roosevelt. Up to that point, the history of federal authority within the industry had been fairly inconstant. Although the Wilson government had exercised a certain amount of control throughout the First World War, a fact Vidal would dramatise in the historical novel *Hollywood* (1990), no permanent organisation existed to police its output. By the 1920s, however, Hollywood was under pressure to reform. The trial of ‘Fatty’ Arbuckle for manslaughter in 1921, and the murder of the

⁴¹ Thomas Jefferson to James Madison, 20 December 1787, *The Portable Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Merrill D. Peterson, 432. The letter is a response to the ratification of the Constitution.

⁴² Ralph Waldo Emerson, ‘The Young American,’ *Complete Prose Works* (London, no date), 397.

⁴³ Roosevelt, First Inaugural Address, 12.

⁴⁴ *MB*, 115. Berman, born March 28, 1905, was a prolific producer who in the period 1931-1945 alone produced 64 motion pictures for MGM.

director William Desmond Taylor in 1922 induced public outrage. Thus in a move to stave off a federal censorship body to control the proliferating scandals, the job of President of the Motion Pictures Producers and Distributors of America was offered to William H. Hays.⁴⁵ The establishment of what came to be known as the Hays Office marked the first significant bid to purge the corruption of the city from the Hollywood hills and return it to the innocence of the frontier.

The authority of the Hays Office was nevertheless inadequate to the task of policing Hollywood in the early years of the Depression. To counter the economic crisis, the industry responded with crowd-pleasers over which Hays exercised little control. The screens of the early '30s were as a result dominated by the political "cycle of movies which concerned the unscrupulous dealings of shady lawyers and cynical newspaper editors," and those "depicting women of easy virtue."⁴⁶ In 1933, however, the threat of federal legislation to control Hollywood output threatened its autonomy. In response to the MGM picture *Gabriel Over the White House*, a satirical fantasy depicting the redemption of a corrupt president by the spirit of the angel Gabriel, a bill was introduced to "ban movies depicting the life and working of politicians in a manner held to reflect on their standing in the community."⁴⁷ Furthermore, the Catholic Legion of Decency threatened a nationwide boycott if Hollywood did not adopt the strict Production Code it had put forward to discipline what it saw as the industry's moral laxity.

⁴⁵ Gerald Mast, *A Short History of the Movies*, third edition (Oxford, 1981), 103-104. Colin Shindler, *Hollywood in Crisis* (London, 1996), 96-97. Hays, in his capacity as Chairman of the Republican National Committee, had courted Hollywood industrialists in order to secure favourable newsreel coverage of Warren G. Harding in the 1920 presidential election. As a consequence he was viewed by its establishment as a sympathetic link to the administration.

⁴⁶ Shindler provides an exhaustive account of this period in *Hollywood in Crisis*. In the chapter 'Trouble in Paradise' he describes the trend toward the dark tales of social exploitation, and in the chapter 'The Hays Office' he discusses the role of the sex siren from Garbo to Mae West.

⁴⁷ Cited, *ibid.*, 114. (*New York Times*, March 8, 1933.) This is in effect a repeat of how the Alien and Sedition Acts were used to tame Hollywood throughout the First World War. Vidal would deal with the political implications of this question in *Hollywood*.

The Hollywood studios had successfully fought the introduction of the Code in 1930, but by 1933 the economic decline had caused admission figures to drop and production to be curtailed. The threat of a boycott therefore had more impact. Coupled with the threat of direct federal authority, the studios consented both to adopt the Production Code and to observe the authority of the Hays Office to implement that Code. The sexual provocateurs of the early '30s such as Ginger Rogers, Katherine Hepburn, and Jeanette MacDonald, were therein reborn as celluloid virgins.⁴⁸ Furthermore, the Code stifled political realism, and forced it into the framework of New Deal optimism. As Will Hays wrote in 1934, "[n]o medium has contributed more than the films to the maintenance of the national morale during a period featured by revolutions, riot, and political turmoil in other countries." "[T]he movies," he qualified, "literally laughed the big bad wolf of the Depression out of the public."⁴⁹

With the advent of war, Hollywood augmented its co-operation with the Roosevelt administration. The result was that, as Colin Shindler observed, from 1941 to 1945 "the alliance between the President and the film companies resulted in open propaganda harnessed to the wider war effort."⁵⁰ Parker Tyler made the same point in *Magic and Myth of the Movies*. Hollywood, he wrote, was "ready with very little conversion to start on war production."

Its formulas not only had immanent precedents in the movies produced for the First World War but were also perfectly standard equipment for the shuffling of military matters with love affairs, the equation of death with life, and the painting of a pathetic idyll of the bereft and unhappy at home and among the conquered peoples abroad.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Ibid., 105.

⁴⁹ Cited, *ibid.*, 219. (*The Nation*, May 4, 1934)

⁵⁰ Ibid., 29.

⁵¹ Tyler, *Magic and Myth*, 134.

Furthermore, the involvement of Hollywood in the war effort epitomised the power it could wield over the country. As John Morton Blum noted, the US was the only belligerent nation not directly within the war zone, and it came down to Hollywood to create an atmosphere of direct involvement.

A sense of common sacrifice, common mission, common suffering imbued besieged Leningrad and London in the time of the blitz, and spread beyond those cities through their national hinterlands. . . But in the absence of a perceived and immediate danger, of a shared response to collective peril, it fell to exhortation to provide a substitute, however pale.⁵²

The exhortation led by Hollywood was guided by the principle that, as the organisation Hollywood Writers Mobilization for Defense stated, the “wartime function of the movies” was to “build morale.” Although not every film had to be directly about war, the organisation qualified, it should “involve a consciousness of war.”⁵³ This consciousness of war, and the ensuing interrelation of Hollywood iconography and American society, provided the sense of “wholeness” that Myra identifies as a product of the cinema.

With the redefinition of the frontier within the political arena and in Hollywood, Roosevelt consolidated the image of the president as the superlative frontiersman. He thereby institutionalised an idea Theodore Roosevelt had first brought to the twentieth century presidency. In the first two volumes of his work *The Winning of the West*, TR had sought to define the identity of America through the frontier. These works were in fact praised by Frederick Jackson Turner when they were first published in 1889.⁵⁴ Moreover, as George E. Mowry observed, throughout his presidency TR endorsed the pioneer lifestyle over that of the city.⁵⁵ His relentless slaughter of every conceivable class of wild animal, his validation of what he called

⁵² John Morton Blum, *V was for Victory* (1976), 15-16.

⁵³ Cited, *ibid.*, 25.

⁵⁴ Edmund Morris, *The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt*, 1979 (1980), 465.

⁵⁵ George E. Mowry, *The Era of Theodore Roosevelt and the Birth of Modern America* (1958), 105.

the “righteous” war against “savages,” and his advocacy of American imperialism brought the idea of the frontiersman to the operation of the presidency.⁵⁶

FDR’s bureaucratic recreation of the Executive branch was equalled, if not surpassed, by his consolidation of the president as a frontiersman who articulated the hopes of the nation. In this he observed his cousin Theodore’s idea that the frontier defined America.⁵⁷ Although he was a product of the New York gentry, FDR personified the ideals of the frontier. What the nation saw, in the words of Eric Goldman, was a President who “would understand and care about all the nagging todays and worrisome tomorrows of ordinary men and women.”⁵⁸ Furthermore, as Godfrey Hodgson wrote in *All Things to All Men*, Roosevelt founded for a generation the idea of what a president ought to be.⁵⁹ It is this idea of what a president, and indeed a man, ought to be, and its correlation to the idea of the hero screened by 1930s cinema, that Vidal aimed to demythologise in *Myra Breckinridge*.

MASCULINITY, EXCEPTIONALISM, EMPIRE

Written two years into the official war in Vietnam, *Myra Breckinridge* urges withdrawal from a history of geographical expansion endorsed on a political level by the doctrine of exceptionalism and on a psychological level by masculinity. With the literal frontier at an end, Vidal endeavoured to remove exceptionalism from the plane

⁵⁶ Cited, Morris, *Rise of Theodore Roosevelt*, 464.

⁵⁷ This is, of course, over and above the details of the New Deal. As Goldman observed, the institution of federal planning under the NRA and AAA meant that “the nation was close to the repudiation of trust-busting and the dependence on compulsory federal planning which Theodore Roosevelt had appealed for under the name of the New Nationalism,” *Rendezvous With Destiny*, 342. This is the reason that T.P. Gore appealed not for a New Deal, but a return to the Square Deal proclaimed by Theodore Roosevelt. The point I am making here, and the point Vidal is making throughout *Myra Breckinridge*, is the heritage of an image and not political details.

⁵⁸ Goldman, *Rendezvous with Destiny*, 344.

⁵⁹ Godfrey Hodgson, *All Things to All Men*, revised edition (London, 1984), 47

of masculinity. The last frontier, he demonstrates in *Myra Breckinridge*, is not to be found in the purported crusade against Communism, but in human sexuality. For the exceptional state to endure, as he had started to argue in *The City and the Pillar*, it is necessary to construct it beyond the tribal restrictions of Puritanism. If the social and political institutions are regulated by an inflexible masculinity, he reasoned, the society would do nothing more than progress from one war to another in order to impose its authority. Vidal indicated that for American society to thrive it would first be necessary to therefore fundamentally reconstruct the terms of political debate. The war in Vietnam had limited the available funding for the social programmes that would create the Great Society promised by Lyndon Johnson in his 1964 presidential campaign. Through *Myra Breckinridge* Vidal maintained that the only alternative would be to return to the original idea of America, to the revolutionary tradition that separated it from the political authoritarianism and social tribalism of the Old World.

Masculinity, exceptionalism, empire, the triad that defines *Myra Breckinridge*, is grounded in the age of Roosevelt. This was an era when, Myra states, the “traditional male” fought the dictators Hitler, Mussolini, Tojo, and created “a world empire.”⁶⁰ It was an age when the idealism central to the political rhetoric of the New Deal and to Hollywood could be channelled into a new frontier. The result was that at the end of the war the frontier had broadened, and Roosevelt had raised the president to the rank of global frontiersman. It is this political heritage, and its mythological foundation in the Golden Age of Hollywood, that defined for Vidal the character of the presidency throughout the Cold War.

The New Frontier of John F. Kennedy that Vidal endorsed in 1960 is furnished with a genealogy throughout both *Washington, D.C.* and *Myra*

⁶⁰ *MB*, 39.

Breckinridge which links its objectives to the age of Roosevelt. What Kennedy honoured, as William E. Leuchtenberg observed, was not Roosevelt the social reformer but “the leader who could keep his cool.” It was Kennedy’s appeal to this Rooseveltian vision of the president as a redemptive hero that had first seduced Vidal. Furthermore, it was the hero-worshipping Schlesinger who had provided the historical and political validation for this enterprise. Schlesinger was saturated in the history of Roosevelt and, as Leuchtenberg also observed, “frequently looked at the events unfolding before him from the perspective of the ‘30s.”⁶¹ It was the failure to realise what Vidal saw as the potential of the New Frontier that had given rise to his quarrel with the idea of an American exceptionalism born from this age. In addition to the political work of *Washington, D.C.*, *Myra Breckinridge* determined how the perspective of the 30s informed not just the political image of Kennedy, but how that image was firmly established in the mythology of the redemptive hero.

The hero of 1960 was by 1967 implicated in an imperial tradition at the heart of exceptionalist rhetoric. Furthermore, whereas the possibility Vidal had envisioned in the years after the Second World War was rejected in the writing of *Washington, D.C.*, in *Myra Breckinridge* he revised it. Myron’s attempt to return to the promise of the Golden Age through his rebirth as Myra in fact reenvisioned the *idea* of exceptionalism for the social and political conditions of the 1960s. Myra is the literal realisation of the American Dream that the individual can in fact achieve anything. From Myron, who “saw himself as a woman, made to suffer at the hands of some insensitive man,” he is remade into “Woman Triumphant,” “at whose feet the proudest men have groveled.”⁶² Yet while it was conservative impulses that led to the creation of Myra Breckinridge, the act of transsexual reconstruction itself redefined the frontier. The “perennial rebirth,” and the consequent “fluidity of

⁶¹ William E. Leuchtenberg, *In the Shadow of FDR* (Ithaca, 1983), 83, 99.

⁶² *MB*, 91, 66, 47.

American life” that for Turner characterised the frontier is for Myra experienced on the body itself.⁶³ She is as a result released both from the strictures of masculinity envisioned in the Golden Age *and* from the cult of the hero.

Myra’s revision of exceptionalism consequently holds no place for the traditional hero. In her endeavour to “realign the sexes” her aim is to destroy the myths of sexual identity endorsed by Hollywood, and return to an older more Dionysian understanding of human sexuality. “[T]he Dionysian,” she concludes in writing about her experience at an orgy, “is still a necessity in our lives. Without it the world has gone neurotic and mad.” This notion is in fact the key to her whole argument. Like her literary predecessor Julian, she advocates a pre-Christian concept of identity, and the only way for young men to endure in modern American society, she therefore concludes, is to have a “double sense” of themselves.

On the one hand, they must appear to accept without question our culture’s myth that the male must be dominant, aggressive, woman-oriented. On the other hand they are perfectly aware that few men are anything but slaves to an economic and social system that does not allow them to knock people down as proof of their virility or in any way act out the traditional male role.

The “wisdom” born from this, she continues, allows “the male swinger . . . to assert himself through polymorphic sexual abandon.” The man who does not develop a double-sense of himself on the other hand is therefore an anachronism, an absolutist, and therefore a threat to “the survival of the human race.”⁶⁴

⁶³ Turner, ‘The Significance of the Frontier in American History,’ 2-3.

⁶⁴ *MB*, 108, 108-109. The counter-culture was abuzz with the theories of Herbert Marcuse, who in *Eros and Civilization* discussed the place of the death-drive in human civilisation, and with Norman O. Brown, who in *Life and Death: The Psychoanalytical Meaning of History* discussed Freud’s idea of the polymorphous perverse. Vidal is a classicist who is too interested in the Dionysian and the idea of pornography to engage with this theoretical debate.

Myra maintains that in an over-populated world, defined by customs that are no longer apposite in an age of machines and advanced medicine, "famine and war are man's only hope." Mankind is therefore the agent of its own destruction. The social and political crises of the 1960s were for Vidal moreover the product of an outdated concept of masculinity. He had argued this point in his 1966 essay 'Pornography.'

Until this generation tribal moralists could argue with perfect conviction that there was only one correct sexual equation: man plus woman equals baby. All else was vice. But now that half the world's population lives with famine—and all the world by 2000, if Pope Paul's as yet unborn guests are allowed to attend (in his unhappy phrase) the "banquet of life"—the old equation has been changed to read: man plus woman equals baby equals famine. If the human race is to survive, population will have to be reduced drastically, if not by atomic war then by law, an unhappy prospect for civil liberties but better than starving.⁶⁵

That a traditionally conceived masculinity was both psychologically and morally a threat to the survival of society by the 1960s is the driving force behind *Myra Breckinridge*. In the endeavour to look beyond his own social and political heritage, Vidal, like Myra, is a modern day Marquis de Sade, a revolutionary who writes that to reinvent a bankrupt society it is essential to abandon the sexual iconography that has thus far sustained it. *Myra Breckinridge* is therefore a deeply political tract through which Vidal argues that a resolution to the current crisis could only result from a fundamental reconstruction of the tenets on which American society is based.

In *Myra Breckinridge* Vidal realises a comprehensive reversal of his earlier thinking. The idea of an America defined by the tradition of exceptionalism could not accommodate the idea of sexual difference he advocated with the publication of *The City and the Pillar* in 1948. His view of Kennedy as a redemptive hero in 1960 could no more promise to realise such aspirations. With the publication of *Myra Breckinridge* in 1968, he issued a challenge to the politics of his fellow dissident,

⁶⁵ 'Pornography,' *US*, 566. (*NYRB*. March 31, 1966.)

Norman Mailer. From *An American Dream* (1963) to *Why Are We In Vietnam?* (1967), Mailer adhered to an aesthetic founded on a traditionally conceived masculinity. As a product both of the '30s and the Second World War, he yearned for the promise of the war, and the release of the "subterranean river of untapped, ferocious, lonely, and romantic desires, that concentration of ecstasy and violence that is the dream-life of the nation." In 1960 Mailer understood that it was the hero (Kennedy) who could achieve this.

It was a hero America needed, a hero central to his time, a man whose personality might suggest contradictions and mysteries that could reach into the alienated circuits of the underground, because only a hero can capture the secret imagination of the people, and so be good for the vitality of his nation—a hero embodies the fantasy and so allows each private mind the liberty to consider its fantasy and find a way to grow.

For Mailer the promise of the American dream unleashed by the war could only be realised under the leadership of a hero. He saw this process epitomised in the figure of FDR: "from his paralytic leg to the royal elegance of his geniality he seemed to contain the country within himself—everyone from the meanest starving cripple to an ambitious young man could expand into the optimism of an improving future because the man offered an unspoken promise of a future that would be rich."⁶⁶ Like Vidal, Mailer was equally disappointed by the failure of Kennedy to fulfil this dream. This disappointment manifested itself in his attempt to reconstruct his idea of the masculine hero.

The mythology of the autonomous man is fundamental to Mailer's literary and political philosophy: to be a man, which he described as "the battle of one's life," is to resist surrender to the "authority of any power in which one does not believe."⁶⁷ For Mailer the American Dream of material success undermined

⁶⁶ Norman Mailer, 'Superman Comes to the Supermarket,' *The Presidential Papers* (London, 1964), 38, 41-42, 42.

⁶⁷ Norman Mailer, 'Advertisement for "The Homosexual Villain,"' *Advertisements for Myself* (1968), 190.

masculinity and replaced it as the dominant authority. He viewed the consumerism that characterised the 1950s as one “rooted, narrow, cautious, and planted in the life-logic of the family.” This countered the potential revealed in the war years of that “which is dynamic, orgiastic, unsettling, explosive, and accelerating to the psyche.”⁶⁸ In 1960 Mailer saw in John F. Kennedy the redemptive hero who would inaugurate a return to the “new jungle of emotion” unleashed by the war. In 1963, when it was clear this change had not been effected by the Kennedy presidency, Mailer endeavoured to reconstruct the terms of the American Dream itself. He attempted this through a reconstruction of his ‘hero’ in the figure of Stephen Rojack in *An American Dream*. Rojack’s experience after the war—from his receipt of the Distinguished Service Cross through to his political failure and marriage to an heiress—is symptomatic of the emasculation Mailer felt had been put into effect by the 1950s. Rojack’s decision at the beginning of the narrative that he is “finally a failure” is a reflection of this.⁶⁹ To resolve this psychological paralysis Mailer returned Rojack to the violence of the battle-field.

Violence is represented as a psychological antidote to the impotence of the American Dream. Rojack embarks on the reconstruction of his masculinity first through the murder of his wife, who is a crude symbol of his post-war enslavement, and second through sex with his wife’s maid. In this latter scene, Rojack narrates that he was consumed by a desire “to forget the sea and dig the earth.” The subsequent alternation between vaginal and anal penetration is represented as the battle between good and evil: vaginal sex is the source of life whereas the rectum is the grave. “I felt as if I was bringing spoils and secrets up from the Devil to God and bearing God’s message of defeat back from that sad womb to the red mills of the Devil.” Faced

⁶⁸ Mailer, ‘Superman Comes to the Supermarket,’ 43.

⁶⁹ Norman Mailer, *An American Dream* (London, 1965), 15.

with the possibility of the maid reaching orgasm, Rojack is forced to make a choice between the two moral poles.

Like a cat caught between two wires I was leaping back and forth, tender and greedy by turns, and then I chose—yes, we would try to make a child. There was no graveyard now, no warehouse, no gloomy church, not that was more like a chapel now, with a few flowers in the garden, a modest decent place, too modest perhaps for me, but its walls were snug, its odours were green, there was a sweetness in the chapel, a muted reverential sweetness in the walls of its tone. “That is what prison will be like for you,” said a last effort of my inner tongue, “Stay here!” came a command from inside of me.

Threatened by this trap, Rojack chooses the Devil at the crucial moment, although he reaches him “a fraction too late.”⁷⁰ Nevertheless, this experience is only a practice run for the prescription of the reinvigorated Dream. It is moreover an illustration of the philosophy that underlines Mailer’s conception of masculinity.

For Mailer, to be a man is to experience heterosexuality, and, at the same time, not to surrender to the authority of the “life-logic of the family.” As a strenuous heterosexual and serial monogamist, Mailer himself had “spent his life,” as he wrote, “in the collective arms of the powerhouse.”⁷¹ When the first instalment of *An American Dream* was published in January 1964, he had married four times, and fathered six children.⁷² As his stabbing of his second wife testified, Mailer had crossed and recrossed the shadow line between the “life-logic of the family” and the “dynamic, orgiastic, unsettling, [and] explosive.” He therefore reconstructed Rojack’s masculinity through his understanding that the archetype of the soldier was essential to survival in post-war America. Rojack therefore gets to fuck a range of women, play with the sanctioned idea of procreation, and then leave to face the frontier of experience untrapped by the trappings of children, marriage: in other words, all those things the soldier could legitimately leave behind and at the same

⁷⁰ Ibid., 47, 48, 49.

⁷¹ ‘The Cavett Show with Gore Vidal and Janet Flanner,’ *The Time of Our Time* (London, 1998), 811.

⁷² *An American Dream* was first published in serial form in *Esquire*, January to August 1964. It was published in novel form March 1965.

time use to validate his masculinity. What this replicated moreover was a myth concerning masculinity endorsed by the Hollywood of the Second World War.

As Lawrence H. Suid observed in his analysis of war movies, *Guts and Glory*, the war film evoked the ideal experience of war for the archetypal heterosexual man. "A soldier can do his duty to his family by being away from them, protecting them from outside danger. He then has the best of both worlds—a woman when he wants her, masculine friendships, and the sexual release of combat."⁷³ The character of Rojack is an attempt to rediscover this potential in contemporary life. This is not to say Mailer advocated that each man murder his wife. What he is saying however is that the psychology to the frontier, as determined by an understanding of war, is an answer to the cultural dislocation. In this Mailer is clearly a product of his era. His concept of what it meant to be a man was validated by war, and the experience of the soldier. Through the character of Rojack, Mailer reenvisioned the traditional frontier hero a source of dissidence against the souring of the American Dream.

What Mailer advocated was a return to the spirit of the old frontier in the tradition of Roosevelt (TR and FDR), Kennedy, and the Golden Age of Hollywood cinema. Vidal criticised Mailer for this on a heated edition of the Dick Cavett Show in 1971. He denounced him for "your violence, your love of murder, your celebration of rage, of hate . . . *American Dream*—what was the dream? A man murders his wife and then buggers this woman afterwards to celebrate an American man's dream." He continued to argue "to the extent that one is interested in the way that society is going, there is quite enough of this stress, quite enough of this violence, without what I think are your celebrations of it."⁷⁴ Vidal, in contrast, argued for a wholly new

⁷³ Lawrence H. Suid, *Guts and Glory: Great American War Movies* (Reading, Massachusetts, 1978), 2, 9.

⁷⁴ This interchange is quoted by Mailer, 'The Cavett Show with Gore Vidal and Janet Flanner,' 825.

frontier. He maintained the American Dream is not to be found within the confines of masculinity but within the more comprehensive diversification of sexual possibility.

The frontier as the space of possibility is at the root of Vidal's reinterpretation of American exceptionalism. His position was that in crossing into the new frontier one should abandon the preconceived values of western culture. This is of course at the theoretical heart of the American experiment, yet as Vidal had pointed out in the essay 'Sex and the Law,' it was the Puritans, who, "persecuting one another for religious heresies, witchcraft, sexual misbehaviour . . . formed that ugly polity whose descendants we are."⁷⁵ This is the essence of his vision for an American exceptionalism, and the grounds on which he opposes the political culture of imperialism, the confines of heterosexual identity as portrayed by the visual media. This is in contrast to the work of Mailer, who in the creation of the hipster, "the white Negro," is reflecting ideas symptomatic of, and not a challenge to, the prevailing orthodoxy. To be an effective dissident, Vidal maintained, would be to transcend the social and political assumptions that characterised 1960s America and to fashion them anew. This is the philosophical challenge at the heart of *Myra Breckinridge*.

THE MISSION TO RESTRUCTURE THE SEXES AND THE CRITICAL RECEPTION

The point of Myra's mission to restructure the sexes is that, in the context of the 1960s, it is time to reject the sexual stereotypes inherited from another age, and to recreate the idea of sexual identity. Although she "yearn[s] romantically" for the return of the Golden Age, she is nonetheless released from the constraints of her

⁷⁵ 'Sex and the Law,' *US*, 532. (*Partisan Review*, Summer 1965.)

heritage by the objectives of her mission, which move toward a philosophical reorganisation of American society. Yet although Vidal said in a 1969 interview, "I exalted neither Myra nor her views," he does state that "I do think that if we survive long enough to evolve a rational society, there will be a trend toward bisexuality." What he did not exult was her "type of polymorphous transsexuality," which is to say that he did not propose the transsexual operation itself as an answer to the current crisis.⁷⁶ Myra's transsexuality is bound into her psychologically complex character, but over and above this it is a philosophical resource used to deconstruct the assumptions which gave rise to the crisis itself.

To inaugurate her reconstruction of American society, Myra isolates an archetype of traditional masculinity, the 6ft tall and "marvelously hung" student Rusty Godowsky. "Rusty is a throwback to the Forties," she concludes, and therefore "in the age of the television commercial he is sadly superfluous, an anachronism, acting out a masculine charade that has lost all meaning." For Myra, it is the television commercial and not Hollywood that manufactures the relevant myths of the current age. "[T]he placing of the man in driver's seat (courtesy of Hertz)," Myra suggests, "reveals in a most cogent way man's need for eternal mastery over space and distance."⁷⁷ This is, within Tyler's formulation, a relevant myth: the "imaginative truth" is in fact a possibility.⁷⁸ The traditional masculinity Rusty personifies is not. "That is why to save him (and the world from his sort), I must change entirely his sense of himself."⁷⁹

Myra Breckinridge is, like *Washington, D.C.*, a work about the nature of power, and an analysis of the culturally validated forms through which power can be

⁷⁶ *Views From A Window*, 107. (*Playboy* interview, 1969).

⁷⁷ *MB*, 115, 30, 140, 19

⁷⁸ Tyler, *Magic and Myth*, 27

⁷⁹ *MB*, 140.

achieved by the individual within a social system. Myra therefore writes that to change Rusty's sense of himself it is necessary to undermine the culturally validated power of his masculinity, and to alter his "relation to his triumphant sex." Her ultimate social aim is to counter the "Mosaic solidity" of Western sexuality and achieve "*fluidity*" between the sexes. "[F]or it is demonstrably true," she argues, "that desire can take as many shapes as there are containers. Yet what one pours into those containers is always the same inchoate human passion, entirely lacking in definition until what holds it shapes it." To achieve this through Rusty she sets out to systematically invalidate his sense of "masculine superiority." First she challenges him about his "inability to walk straight." In her capacity as a tutor in Posture and Empathy, she stages a kitsch performance as a stern school-mistress which leads to an examination of Rusty's back. The situation is, of course, a ruse. Her real aim is to observe "what is magic from the unusual, privileged angle." Her triumph in this scene is to pull down his jockey shorts, leaving him to cling to the wall as "the last protector of his modesty."⁸⁰

For Myra herself, this process is, above her altruistic dedication to saving the human race, an act of revenge. The approach to the progenitive organ from behind is therefore at the core of her dialectic. For Myron, who "invariably took it from behind," this approach signalled a loss of power. "A lifetime of penetration had brought him only misery," Myra writes. In the episode that is the climax of her mission, Myra leads Rusty through a medical examination with the aim of equalling this loss of power. In "reducing his status from man to boy to child" through the course of the examination, she takes on the role of her mother Gertrude, a practical nurse. This process mirrors the classic form of masochism Hitchcock had screened in *Psycho* (1960). In his murder of young women, acts that replicate his emasculation at the hands of his mother, Norman Bates becomes his dead mother in order to, as the

⁸⁰ Ibid., 182, 220, 74, 72.

psychiatrist explains, transfer the guilt onto her. To rape Rusty, and redefine his masculinity, Myra adopts the role of her mother the practical nurse. She is, in other words, replicating Myron's emasculation at the hands of his mother. To complete "the holy passion of Myra Breckinridge," she ultimately then rapes Rusty with a 12" dildo strapped to her crotch. "I was able, as Woman Triumphant," she writes, "to destroy the adored destroyer."⁸¹

Over and above this biographical question, Vidal is making a serious point about the demonisation of homosexuality in Western culture. In 1966 he wrote that

to maintain that a homosexual act is in itself antisocial or neurotic is dangerous nonsense, of the sort that the astonishing Dr. Edmund Bergler used to purvey when he claimed that he would "cure" homosexuals, as if this was somehow desirable, like changing Jewish noses or straightening Negro hair in order to make it possible for those so altered to pass more easily through a world of white Christians with snub noses.⁸²

This has been one of the enduring themes in Vidal's writing, dating as far back as the unfinished novel about the life of a homosexual author he started to write in 1941.⁸³ Nevertheless, in *Myra Breckinridge* he takes it to a level unwitnessed by his earlier fiction. It is no wonder that the *Time* review stated that "[n]othing in the versatile Vidal's past will prepare the reader for *Myra Breckinridge*."⁸⁴ To give form to his "all-out attack on American sexual attitudes and the machismo," Vidal engaged with the idea of pornography outlined in his 1966 essay.⁸⁵ Pornography, Vidal argued, is by its very inventiveness an attack on the "tribal norm" of heterosexuality. "[T]he pornographers by what they write," he observed, "show that in actual fact the old laws are not only broken . . . but are being questioned in a new way." Pornography is therefore political for it recognises "that the only sexual norm is that there is none."⁸⁶

⁸¹ Ibid., 92, 180, 182, 184.

⁸² 'Pornography,' *US*, 567.

⁸³ 'A Novel,' GVC, Box 16, Folders 3-4.

⁸⁴ 'Myra the Messiah,' *Time*, February 16, 1968, 60.

⁸⁵ Interview with Michael Barber, 'Crusader against cant,' *Books and Bookmen*, April 7, 1974, 68.

⁸⁶ 'Pornography,' *US*, 565, 568.

From Myra's experience at an orgy through to the climactic rape of Rusty, the graphic descriptions are used to destabilise the sexual norm. That *Newsweek* accused Vidal of writing "erotic propaganda" for homosexuality proved exactly what he was up against.⁸⁷

All in all the reviews, as Catharine Stimpson later pointed out, concerned themselves with two American obsessions: "proper sex and business."⁸⁸ *Myra Breckinridge* was released six weeks before the official publication date and without the usual pre-release for reviewers. "I wanted to prove," Vidal said in 1974, "that a book could do well simply because it was interesting—without the support of bookchat writers."⁸⁹ It is far more likely that in publishing a novel unlike any other he had written, Vidal wanted to have the novel on sale before it was attacked, as *The City and the Pillar* was in 1948. Although the reviewers griped about this, what really offended them was the sex. It is "short on traditional character development but long on sex of all kinds," *Newsweek* stated; "most of it just seems sniggering, like a small boy writing dirty words on a wall," wrote *Publisher's Weekly*; "it bears the same relationship to honest literature that a filthy washroom story does to Chaucer's 'Wife of Bath,' " *Book Ends* declared; "Has literary decency fallen so low—or fashionable camp risen that high?" asked *Time*.⁹⁰ It was down to *The New York Times* review to epitomise the critical reception.

The review, written by Eliot Fremont-Smith, is an exercise in syllogism. It starts by observing that "those who are interested in perversity bore rather quickly." Each perverse act therefore encourages them to ask only "What now?" "The

⁸⁷ Paul D. Zimmerman, 'Elan Vidal,' *Newsweek*, February 26, 1968. 53.

⁸⁸ Catharine Stimpson, 'My O My O Myra,' *Writer Against the Grain*, ed. Parini, 195.

⁸⁹ *Views From A Window*, 105. (*Paris Review* interview, 1974.)

⁹⁰ Zimmerman, 'Elan Vidal,' *Newsweek*; *Publisher's Weekly*, February 5, 1968, 63; Thomas B. Sherman, 'Vidal Seems Bent on Shocking His Way To Best-Sellerdom in a Grim New Novel,' *Book Ends*, March 10, 1968; 'Myra the Messiah,' *Time*.

common variations of sexual activity, heterosexual and homosexual, have been pretty thoroughly raked over so for shock one must begin to forage in earnest." The background of this 'perversion' established, Fremont-Smith declares that Vidal therefore "offers up transvestitism." (Aside from being an invented word—the correct term is transvestism—this is plainly wrong.) He adds in a horrified tone, that "[b]estiality, serious mutilation (Sade made Mod and Pop), pedophilia, necrophilia—the mind grows numb—are doubtless in the offing." Nevertheless, with the shock value of "a really serious transvestite" established, he points out that such a book raises the obvious "sales problem." Can such a novel, he asks, be popular? "Probably not," he concludes.

But wait! Suppose nobody knows what it's about? Suppose the book is put on sale without reviews—only news stories about how review copies were withheld and the mystery of it all, how 55,000 copies are now in print and it's the best selling Vidal novel yet? In fact, for the buyer, the only information he has to go on is the jacket blurb, which reads in full: "A new and very different novel by the author of 'Julian' and 'Washington, D.C.' " So somebody thinks maybe it's a more sophisticated 'Valley of the Dolls.' Why not? Buyer—who begins to resemble that "unwilling sexual object"—beware.⁹¹

Each syllogistic step leads to the conclusion that the poor reader, the victim, is symbolically raped by Vidal and his "repulsive" book. Like Thomas B. Sherman in *Book Ends*, all Fremont-Smith can see is a deliberate attempt to shock that has no substance.⁹²

It is interesting to note, therefore, that in the far more radical *New York Review of Books*, the reviewer, in an albeit different way, reaches a similar conclusion. Margaret Hentoff mourned the fact that the "homosexual underground" Vidal had explored in *The Judgement of Paris* had surfaced in the '60s. She described *Myra Breckinridge* as a dull mirror of obsessions that underlined the sexual

⁹¹ Eliot Fremont-Smith, 'Like Fay Wray if the Light is Right,' *NYT*, February 3, 1968. The quotation at the end of the indented paragraph is from the essay 'Pornography.' Fremont-Smith is crudely trying to use Vidal's own rhetoric against him.

⁹² Sherman, 'Vidal Seems Bent on Shocking.'

revolution. In the '50s, she continued, two of the "hippest sections" of the underground "were the Black and the Gay. Both were mysterious, initiatory, and glamorous in the way that things are glamorous when they contain the potential for both excitement and danger." The '60s were clearly a disappointment to Hentoff. With the patronising air of a white heterosexual supremacist she bemoaned the fact that "the invisible man became visible—would not, in fact, go away," and that in an age when "*everyone is everything*," homosexuality is "an almost puritanical rigidity."

Now, walking on the waters of polymorphous perversity and sexual revolution, Vidal has written the first popular book of perverse pornography—a book for which one does not need even the slightest special taste. With *Myra Breckinridge*, his preoccupations seem to have entered the mainstream. Or the mainstream has enveloped them.⁹³

Hentoff accuses Vidal of just not being "fashionable" any more because with *Myra Breckinridge* he entered the mediocre province of the mainstream. What she fails to realise in her Maileresque conclusions is that *Myra Breckinridge* is an indictment of the very concept of the underground as destructive. Of course, the underground is good for hipsters like Hentoff who can find in it a difference that is cool. Like Mailer's white Negro, it is another act of cultural colonisation, and reflects a complete inability to understand that to advocate the underground is to be implicated in the very act of oppression itself. In the end Hentoff, who also starts with the story of the pre-release, aligns herself with the majority of the reviewers who recoiled, as Roy Newquist wrote in *The Chicago Heights Star*, at the "sheer pornography."⁹⁴

CRISIS AND CONCLUSION

⁹³ Margaret Hentoff, 'Growing Up Androgynous,' *NYRB*, May 9, 1968, 32-33.

⁹⁴ Roy Newquist, 'Vidal's Unlikely "Myra,"' *Chicago Heights Star*, February 25, 1968. See appendix iii for two instances of the academic response to *Myra Breckinridge*, the first in 1969, the second in 1971.

The last chapters of *Myra Breckinridge*, as Robert F. Kiernan wrote, are a somewhat “boomerang ending.”⁹⁵ This ending is born of the crisis arising after Myra has raped Rusty. The rape sequence is the climax of the novel, and results only in further confusion for those involved. Rusty emerges as an exceptionally masculine aggressor; yet Myra, on the other hand, adopts the role of protector to Rusty’s abandoned girlfriend, Mary-Ann Pringle. She induces her own psychological crisis in her attempt to transcend the unequivocal relationship between man and his “secret sphincter” to plumb the mysteries of the womb. The “uterine mysteries, so deplored by Myron, are for me the be-all and end-all.” She overreaches herself in her attempt to reconstruct the sexes in taking her role as the messiah in too classic a sense. Her aim is now to challenge death, “the maw of creation itself that spews us forth and sucks us back into the black oblivion where stars are made and energy waits to be born.”⁹⁶

On the more common plane of existence meanwhile, the endeavour to secure her inheritance reaches its own climax. Faced with the proof that Myron Breckinridge is not dead, she climbs onto Buck Loner’s desk, and, Loner reports, “hikes up her dress and pulls down her goddam panties and shows us this scar and balls where cock and balls should be and says quote I am Myron Breckinridge unquote.” With this particular truth out, and Rusty reborn (although not to plan), she concentrates on the challenge represented by Mary-Ann. Its very complexity, coupled with the fact that Mary-Ann resists her advances with the words “if only you were a man,” forces her into a theoretical corner. “For what true purpose have I smashed the male principle only to be entrapped by the female?” she asks. This is in fact the question on which the first draft is completed. It is not taken up again until this draft had been turned into typescript. The final chapters are dated 2-3 June 1967. There is

⁹⁵ Robert Kiernan, *Gore Vidal* (1982), 100.

⁹⁶ *MB*, 206-207, 165, 228, 233.

also nothing like the final coda, which is not added until the fifth draft. What this suggests is Vidal's own theoretical quandary as to what the conclusion should be.⁹⁷

To reach toward a conclusion, Vidal has Myra next wake up in hospital, the victim of a hit-and-run. Without hormone injections, and with the removal of her silicon implants she enters a third incarnation as the square Myron. While Rusty has turned out to be "a complete homosexual," Myron is living in the San Fernando Valley with his wife Mary-Ann. He closes the narrative philosophically with Rousseau's conclusion that humanity would have been more content had it "kept to the middle road between the indolence of the primitive state and the questing activity to which we are prompted by our self-esteem."

I think that is a very fine statement and one which, all in all, I'm ready to buy, since it is a proven fact that happiness, like the proverbial blackbird, is to be found in your ^{back}backyard if you just know where to look.⁹⁸

This coda is certainly ironic. It unquestionably reflects that Vidal had no conception of where Myra could possibly go once she had reached her own philosophical impasse. Nevertheless, the middle road does not necessarily mean domestic heterosexual bliss in the San Fernando Valley. Furthermore, the conclusion is also a reflection of political crisis that faced America as opposition to the war in Vietnam mounted.

In a 1968 interview with Vidal, Digby Diehl stated, "You mentioned a secret political key to Myra Breckinridge. What is it?" Vidal replied, "Myra Breckinridge is really Bobby Kennedy. That's the inside story."⁹⁹ In spite of the hostility that existed between the two, and the possibility that this may no more than a scurrilous

⁹⁷ Ibid., 223, 241. 'Myra Breckinridge,' GVC, Boxes 60-62.

⁹⁸ MB, 223, 241, 260, 262, 264.

⁹⁹ Interview with Digby Diehl, 'Gore Vidal says: Myra Breckinridge is Bobby Kennedy,' *Los Angeles FM & Fine Arts*, May 1968, 14.

wisecrack, it is worth taking Vidal seriously.¹⁰⁰ There is in *Myra Breckinridge* a meditation on the change in the political landscape which encompasses the conflict between the president, Lyndon Johnson, and the heir presumptive, Robert Kennedy. This conflict is referred to when Myra first confronts Buck Loner, and is met with “that same narrow-eyed gaze one detects in photographs of President Johnson whenever he is being asked a question about Bobby Kennedy.”¹⁰¹ Moreover, as Vidal said of *Myra Breckinridge* in 1974, “it was an all-out attack on American sexual attitudes and the machismo.” Aside from Hollywood, he added, “I also had Lyndon Johnson very much in mind.”¹⁰² Whereas Buck Loner represents Golden Age Hollywood and Johnson, Myra Breckinridge is representative of the new direction in American politics epitomised by Robert Kennedy. Johnson ^{belonged to the} school of the 1930s, as Arthur Schlesinger pointed out, and therefore opposed appeasement in Vietnam.¹⁰³ He took the stand of total victory, whereas Kennedy was (at least by 1967) in favour of negotiation, of bringing the dissident Vietnamese National Liberation Front into the political debate. “The essence of successful counterinsurgency,” he claimed, “is not to kill but to bring the insurgent back into national life.”¹⁰⁴ This forecast a change in imperial policy, and a move away from the psychology of victory that was a legacy of the Second World War.

In March 1967, a month before Vidal started to write *Myra Breckinridge*, Kennedy delivered his strongest speech to date against the approach of the Johnson administration to the war. He reiterated his stand on negotiation, and stated that the country had to strive for peace in spite of an adversary that “has pursued relentless

¹⁰⁰ In *Palimpsest*, Vidal is speculative on Kennedy’s sexuality. He repeats a story told to him by the ballet dancer Rudolph Nureyev that he and RFK once shared an American soldier, 363. (In his biography *RFK*, C. David Heymann discusses further instances of Kennedy’s homosexual conduct.) Nevertheless, this may also be entirely practical joking at the expense of a man for whom Vidal had great contempt.

¹⁰¹ *MB*, 15.

¹⁰² Barber, ‘Crusader against cant,’ 68.

¹⁰³ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *Robert Kennedy and His Times* (London, 1978), 725.

¹⁰⁴ Cited, *ibid.*, 730.

and unyielding conquest.”¹⁰⁵ Kennedy did not depart from the official justification for the war, and, like the classic war film, represented the nation, “as peace loving, involving itself in war only in self-defense and to uphold democratic ideals.”¹⁰⁶ As a presidential aspirant moreover, Kennedy was constrained^{by} the fact that, according to a February 1967 Harris poll, seventy percent of the American people supported Johnson’s policy. As a result, C. David Heymann concluded, he “felt compelled to express his fundamental loyalty to his country and its soldiers.”¹⁰⁷ The crisis at the end of *Myra Breckinridge* is, in an allegorical sense, a mirror of this. While the novel is about rebirth, and the American tradition of revolution, it is also about the extent to which the ideology that preceded the rebirth informs and corrupts it. The crisis Myra experiences at the end of the novel rises from the fact that she cannot wholly discard the rigid iconography of heterosexuality. This is why, in the end, Myra Breckinridge is Robert Kennedy. As Andrew Kopkind wrote in March 1968, in the final analysis Kennedy is the “legitimate political focus for dissent.” He would save the political system from the inside, and thus not check corporate power nor imperial expansion.¹⁰⁸ Myra Breckinridge is likewise not the answer because she is as much trapped within the confines of heterosexual iconography just as Kennedy is trapped by laws of the current political system.

Vidal took up this question in the essay ‘Manifesto and Dialogue.’ In his interview with Digby Diehl, Vidal recalled that the political activist Tom Hayden, in a debate on the New Left, kept “talking about Feeling—that if you had revolutionary Feeling, then you must strike up and destroy this terrible power structure—and I said, ‘What’s the alternative?’ And he said, ‘That will evolve,’ and I said, ‘that’s too dangerous a

¹⁰⁵ Cited, C. David Heymann, *RFK* (London, 1998), 440.

¹⁰⁶ Suid, *Guts and Glory*, 2.

¹⁰⁷ Heymann, *RFK*, 440.

¹⁰⁸ Andrew Kopkind, ‘The Importance of Kennedy,’ *America: The Mixed Curse* (London, 1969), 163-164. (*New Statesman*, March 29, 1968.)

prescription.’ ” This, he argued, was the reason that Myra had failed. “Myra, like so many revolutionaries, does not have a plan—she just has an instinct, she has a direction. But she has no alternative to offer, so everything goes wrong for her.”¹⁰⁹ Again, the question for Vidal is that democracy can only be ensured by establishing thought over emotion. To allow an alternative to just develop of its own accord would be to use the prejudices Kennedy was forced to rely on in his opposition to the war. As a response to this, Vidal formulated the idea of an informed Authority to counter this trend.

‘Manifesto and Dialogue’ is a call for the institution of an Authority to police a state threatened with self-destruction. In the manifesto, Vidal argued for the creation of an effective dictatorship to “preserve the human race.” In a polluted, overpopulated world, where “irrational violence flourishes because man needs more space in which to *be* than the modern city allows,” he advocated the establishment of an Authority “with the power to control human population, to redistribute food, to purify air, water, soil, to re-pattern the cities.” He called for a reversal of the current social and political organisation of the country, which has, he concluded, “created a hell and called it The American Way of Life.”

It is a paradox of the acquisitive society in which we now live that although private morals are regulated by law, the entrepreneur is allowed considerable freedom to use—and abuse—the public in order to make money. The American pursuit of happiness might be less desperate if the situation were reversed.

What such an Authority would *not* have the power to do therefore would be to regulate the private, consensual acts of its citizens. It should neither limit free speech, and as such its activities would be under constant surveillance from “watchful committees as well as by the press.” The result, he maintained, would mean, as ironic

¹⁰⁹ Diehl, ‘Gore Vidal says,’ 13, 12.

as it may sound, that it “could begin to realize something of the spirit of this nation’s first charter.” For “[t]he alternative to a planned society is no society.”¹¹⁰

The resolution is, as it was in 1960, for a dictator, although one committed to the right ends. It is the good Caesar, bad Caesar dilemma in a somewhat different form. It is such a conclusion toward which *Myra Breckinridge* reached. Myra writes that although devoted to the “old America,” she would nevertheless “only be only too happy to become world dictator, if only to fulfil my mission.”¹¹¹ What Vidal is opposed to is the destructive power of a society unchecked. As he said in the essay ‘Pornography,’ state control is “an unhappy prospect for civil liberties but better than starving.”¹¹² While Myra moves toward this, she is undone by her need for revenge and her messianic drive. Her private demands therefore end up destroying the public ones.

The essay ‘Manifesto and Dialogue’ casts an interesting light on this, and on Vidal’s understanding of his own internal wranglings over what could be done to stem the current crisis. After launching the manifesto for an Authority, he dramatises this internal dialogue. “Hedonistic and solipsistic,” he writes, “my Private Self believes the making of literature is the whole self’s proper task. The Public Self, on the other hand, sees the world’s end plainly and wants to avoid it, sacrificing, if necessary, art and private pleasure in order to be of use.” The question of the Authority is of course difficult, and the two selves dispute it fervently. The Public Self states that it is typical of the Public Self to “state what needs to be done and then not to tell us how it should be done.”¹¹³ This is interesting when related to *Myra Breckinridge*, during the course of which “the how it should be done” is undermined

¹¹⁰ ‘Manifesto and Dialogue,’ *Homage to Daniel Shays* (London, 1974), 319, 320, 321. (*Esquire*, October 1968.)

¹¹¹ *MB*, 41.

¹¹² ‘Pornography,’ *US*, 566.

¹¹³ ‘Manifesto and Dialogue,’ *Homage to Daniel Shays*, 322.

by a need for revenge and power driven by the Private Self.¹¹⁴ The answer that is provided in the arena of 'Manifesto and Dialogue' nevertheless disturbs both selves. In its programme of eugenics Vidal recalls rather than criticises the scenario of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*.

Although a dictatorship, the Authority, the Public Self argues, would be confined to the problems of the public sector. This has its own problems. "I would think," the Private Self concludes, "that whoever or whatever controls the public life of a society will automatically control the private sector." The Public Self responds,

Obviously there will be a constant tension between public and private necessities. And it is possible that the private will lose. It usually does in authoritarian societies. But then it does not do well in libertarian ones either. Witness the small-town American's terror of his neighbors' opinion. However, the one novelty I offer is a clear demarcation between the public and the private. The state will not intrude on private lives as it does now.

The point to the Authority as an exercise in dissidence is that the current system is a quasi-democracy, and moving toward totalitarianism. Vidal concluded that the "true nightmare" is "the popular television performer who will subvert the state simply for something to do." "That's you," shouts back the Private Self, to which the Public responds "I confess that if it weren't for you I might give it a try." The alternative is to let the "mindless authority" come, "one dedicated not to human survival but to its own aggrandizement."¹¹⁵ It is this problem which defines Vidal's work throughout the next decade.

The alternative would, as Vidal conceived it, be the rise of the opportunistic politician, the "television performer" who through a stated commitment to the

¹¹⁴ The consequent advocacy of a kibbutz type system as opposed to the economic unit of the family is of no surprise considering Vidal's own background. It is even more suggestive that the Private Self state that the end of the family "will benefit humanity, but it will destroy the novel." 'Manifesto and Dialogue,' 325.

¹¹⁵ 'Manifesto and Dialogue,' *Homage to Daniel Shays*, 326, 327.

confines of exceptionalism would undermine the republic and install what was in effect a dictatorship. Nevertheless, the Authority is a reverie, and the aim of his work herein is to guard against the real threat. There is as such a marked change in his emphasis. In his criticism of a media defined political system, his attack on Cold War America concentrated less on political ideology, and more on how it was founded on a social and political mythology. "I knew," Vidal later wrote in *Screening History*, "that subscribing to any ideology would be pointless in a country so organised as ours."¹¹⁶ The crisis at the end of *Myra Breckinridge* bore the enlightenment that the only thing left for the dissident would be to guard against disinformation and the installation of a dictatorship under the banner of liberty.

¹¹⁶ *Screening History* (London, 1992), 79-80.

The Politics of Opposition, 1968-1978

The writing of *Washington, D.C.* and *Myra Breckinridge* represented a form of political exorcism for Gore Vidal. In *Washington, D.C.* he could not find in the teachings of his grandfather an adequate political resource to inform his work as a dissident. He concluded that the approach of the conservative T.P. Gore to the social and political challenges of the 1930s was anachronistic. As a result, he turned against the idea that there ever was, or ever could be, a golden age. In *Myra Breckinridge* he found that the cinema of the 1930s, which had likewise informed the political idealism of his youth, was integral to the imperial order he came to oppose. The ideological contradiction that had hitherto informed his work was to a certain extent ended. Throughout the next decade Vidal used what he learned from this closure to reveal the practices through which the government concealed its political and economic objectives. He concluded that, through the calculated use of the media machine, it had used the rhetoric of democracy to institute a fascist state. Through the years 1968 to 1978, the political legacy of the 1968 election, and of the war in Vietnam, was to become his subject. He was moreover so disillusioned with the idea of America that he could not envision an alternative.

THE AGE OF RICHARD NIXON AND A NEW ERA OF TELEVISION POLITICS

1968 marked a decisive turning point in American history. In January, almost three years after the official start of the war in Vietnam, 58^{percent} of Americans identified

themselves as hawks whereas 28^{percent}_A claimed to be doves. In March the percentage stood at a uniform 40^{percent}_A.¹ This conversion occurred in the aftermath of a full-scale offensive launched by Hanoi on January 30. The network television reports of the attack on every town and city of consequence in South Vietnam induced a reaction that consolidated the crisis of confidence which had metastasised throughout the 1960s. For the first time the frustration which had led to race riots and student rebellion threatened to engulf the wider population. On February 8 Robert Kennedy gave voice to this threat when he stated that the January offensive had “finally shattered the mask of official illusion with which we have concealed our true circumstances, even from ourselves.”² On February 27, Walter Cronkite, who founded his success as anchor for the CBS *Evening News* on his non-partisan delivery, reinforced this verdict.³ “To say that we are mired in stalemate,” he reported from Saigon, “seems the only realistic, yet unsatisfactory, conclusion.”⁴ When the opinion that the war would not result in a conclusive victory penetrated the mainstream the confidence in an invincible United States was debilitated.

Arthur Schlesinger accounted for the crisis of confidence when he wrote “[e]vents seem to have slipped beyond our control.”⁵ This process only snowballed after the January Tet Offensive. On March 31, Lyndon Johnson announced the de-escalation of the war and his withdrawal from the presidential race. On April 4 Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated. On June 5 Robert Kennedy was likewise fatally shot. Prior to this chain of events, as Eric Barnouw noted, the majority of Americans who watched prime-time television had been chiefly insulated from the unrest. The “shouters, protesters, attackers” were on the periphery, “pushing into

¹ Godfrey Hodgson, *America In Our Time* (1976), 384, 357.

² ‘Robert Kennedy Calls Vietnam an Unwinnable War,’ February 8 1968, *Major Problems in the History of the Vietnam War*, ed. Robert J. McMahon, second edition (Lexington, 1995), 341.

³ Eric Barnouw, *The Image Empire* (1970), 301.

⁴ ‘Walter Cronkite Criticizes a Policy “Mired in Stalemate,”’ *Major Problems*, ed. McMahon, 529.

⁵ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Crisis of Confidence* (Boston, 1969), ix.

newscasts but seldom beyond.”⁶ In response to the threat of widespread social and political turmoil, the majority of the people sought the restoration of order. In fact, the Survey Research Center found that although roughly three out of five Americans in 1968 thought intervention in Vietnam was a mistake, the same majority would rather escalate the war than simply withdraw.⁷ In response to the crisis, the nation therefore did what it had been conditioned to do, and sought a strong leader who augured a return to stability.

In August, 1968, Vidal engaged in a television commentary on the Republican and Democratic Conventions with the right-wing polemicist William F. Buckley. The series opened at the Republican Convention in Miami Beach, where the leading contenders for the presidential nomination were Nelson Rockefeller, Ronald Reagan, and Richard Nixon. To inaugurate the first broadcast on August 5 Vidal stated,

The question before the convention is this: Can an ageing Hollywood juvenile actor with a right-wing script defeat Richard Nixon, a professional politician who currently represents no discernible interest but his own.⁸

For Vidal, the convention had nothing to do with the medium of party politics. It had, on the other hand, everything to do with the medium of television. “At Miami Beach,” he observed in the essay ‘The Twenty-Ninth Republican Convention,’ “television was everywhere: in the air, on the streets, in the hotel lobbies, on the convention floor.” The race riots that erupted in city of Miami as the convention sat therefore “went almost unnoticed” because, he argued, the only “important task” was “creating suspense where there was none.” The result was that in conforming to the medium it was impossible for the convention to concern itself with substantial

⁶ Barnouw, *Image Empire*, 314.

⁷ Hodgson, *America In Our Time*, 393.

⁸ Cited, Tom Mackin. ‘Vidal Destroys an Image,’ *Miami Evening News*, August 6, 1968.

political issues. The delegates were “docile beyond belief, stepping this way and that as required by men with helmets and handmikes which, like magic wands, could confer for an instant total recognition.”⁹ It was only the promise of prime-time celebrity that held any significance. Television enabled the delegates to sidetrack the fundamental questions raised by the war in Vietnam, and to retreat into a political fiction. This response to the crisis of confidence, Vidal argued, was to then define American politics.

From the standpoint of a television commentator, Vidal observed that it was the *language* of the medium itself that determined the nature of the convention. This signified, he maintained, that it had “changed entirely the nature of our continuing history” by “exalting the chorus and diminishing the actors.” Furthermore,

[w]atching things as they happen, the viewer is part of events in a new way to man. And never is he so much part of the whole as when things do not happen, for, as Andy Warhol so wisely observed, people will always prefer to look at something rather than nothing.¹⁰

The screening of the convention involved the viewer in a process the overall meaning of which was determined not by the demands of the politician but by the demands of the television production team. As Marshall McLuhan wrote in a passage that was circulated among the Nixon PR team, it was under such circumstances that television was at its most competent. “Because the low definition of TV insures a high degree of audience involvement,” McLuhan stated, “the most effective programs are those which consist of some process to be completed.”¹¹ In other words, image and interaction prevailed over the more definitive issues at hand. For Vidal this was the only way to understand a convention so entirely separate from the political turmoil it proposed to arrest.

⁹ ‘The Twenty-Ninth Republican Convention,’ *US*, 845. (*NYRB*, September 12, 1968.)

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 844.

¹¹ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media* (1964), 319.

Throughout the essay 'The Twenty-Ninth Republican Convention,' Vidal argued that it was consequently the precedence of *celebrity* that threatened to displace all other media and to redefine the medium of politics itself. This was noted, Vidal wrote, "with sour wonder by journalists who have begun to fear that their rendering of events into linear type may prove to be as irrelevant an exercise as turning contemporary literature into Greek." As Andrew Kopkind noted in his reports for *The New Statesman*, "[t]he mythology of convention politics is no longer credible," for it "merely legitimizes" a process already determined by the party elites. In Kopkind's analysis the convention was marked by the "unusual agreement between press and politicians that this is an expensive non-event." Nevertheless, he continued, television created the illusion of suspense by the commentators' deliberate inflation "of the excitement in order to justify the importance of their own assignments." "Not many conventions in other years have been relevant to the country's problems," Kopkind qualified, but in the final analysis "what is unusual now is the *agreement* that this one cannot connect with the outside crisis."¹²

The London *Sunday Times* journalists Lewis Chester, Godfrey Hodgson, and Bruce Page reached a similar conclusion in their book *An American Melodrama*. Symbolically, they wrote, Miami Beach was the perfect location for the convention because it was it catered "to every class of Hollywoodian fantasy." More salient was the fact that whereas the Democratic Convention in Chicago (August 26-30) would crystallise "the deep ideological divisions in American society, the convention at Miami Beach produced a more explicit statement of the American dilemma: the wilful divorce of politics from social realities."¹³ This is indicative of why the

¹² Andrew Kopkind, 'No Hope from Miami Beach,' *America: The Mixed Curse* (London, 1969), 178, 179. (*New Statesman*, September 8, 1968.)

¹³ Lewis Chester, Godfrey Hodgson, Bruce Page, *An American Melodrama*, (New York, 1969), 480, 482.

process itself was an ideal event for the medium of television, and, moreover, why Nixon went on to win the presidential election. The Democratic Convention was marked by the sort of protest and violence that the majority of the nation wanted to overlook. The Republican Convention on the other hand signified a return to the tenor of prime-time television, and a polity founded on unity rather than division.

It was on the character of this unity, and its dependence on the idiom of celebrity, that Vidal concentrated. In his analysis it accounted for the political success of Ronald Reagan. "Only Ronald Reagan among the politicians at Miami exerted the same spell" as the television celebrity, he observed, for as "a bona fide star of the Late Show" he is "equally ubiquitous, equally mythic." What distinguished Reagan was the simple fact that he "belongs to the country" in the way that the average politician could not. Vidal understood his essentially apolitical "warm and folksy performance" to be projected over the heads of the "liberal Eastern press" to

some legendary constituency at the far end of the tube, some shining Carverville where good Lewis Stone forever lectures Andy Hardy on the values of thrift.¹⁴

Vidal saw Reagan as representative of a small-town America that existed only in fiction. The Andy Hardy films of ^{the} '30s and '40s, Vidal wrote in 1957, were little more than MGM executive Louis B. Mayer's "sentimentalization of family relationships." They "bore little relationship to reality but such is the force of art, even at its popular and least responsible level, that families in life imitated this arbitrary vision."¹⁵ For Vidal, the Hardy series was symptomatic of Hollywood's idealisation ^{of} American culture, and its popularisation not of the complexity of the American experiment but of an unsophisticated rendition of American exceptionalism. Vidal's essential point

¹⁴ 'The Twenty-Ninth Republican Convention,' *US*, 845, 842.

¹⁵ Letter to Bosley Crowther, 22 April 1957, GVC, M97-209, Box 2, Folder 17.

in 'The Twenty-Ninth Republican Convention' is that the constituency to which Reagan appealed was an idealised picture of how Americans would *like* to see themselves. Reagan was for this reason suited to television, for as Marshall McLuhan wrote, its nature to reject the strong personality in favour of "the icon, the inclusive image. Instead of a political viewpoint or platform, the inclusive posture or stance. Instead of the product, the process."¹⁶ In other words, when Reagan arrived at the convention to warn of the dangers of crime in the streets, he tapped into the mind of his ideal electorate. His stance was vague enough for the viewer to fill in the details, thus completing the process.

Vidal consequently argued that the union of television and politics laid bare by the convention foretold the political direction the United States. "[A]s the age of television progresses," he concluded, "the Reagans will be the rule, not the exception."¹⁷ This point was underlined by the appearance of John Wayne. Addressing the delegation, Wayne denounced the "left-wing" critics of his film *The Green Berets*, a pro-Vietnam film that portrayed the war as an exercise in American benevolence.¹⁸ This in itself showed that the warnings of *Myra Breckinridge* were prescient. As Garry Wills noted in his study *John Wayne's America*, *The Green Berets* was wrought within the conventions of Second World War cinema. "People who did not want to know about the actual Vietnam war," Wills argued, "could feel that the national unity and resolve of World War II might turn around this strange new conflict in the far-off jungles of the East."¹⁹ In response to Wayne's harangue, Vidal quipped that the "ideal ticket" for the Republican party "would be John Wayne and his daughter."²⁰ Derision aside, Vidal recognised that it would be the psychology of the Wayne hero that would appeal to the nation as a restorative in a time of crisis.

¹⁶ McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 321.

¹⁷ 'The Twenty-Ninth Republican Convention,' *US*, 842, 843.

¹⁸ Cited, Mackin, 'Vidal Destroys an Image.'

¹⁹ Garry Wills, *John Wayne's America*, (1997), 233.

²⁰ Cited, Mackin, 'Vidal Destroys an Image.'

It was a resurrected Richard Nixon, however, who embodied the winning formula that underwrote the convention at Miami Beach.

Once nominated Nixon gravely explained how he had pulled it off. He talked about the logistics of campaigning. He took us backstage. It was a nice background briefing, but nothing more. No plans for the ghettos, no policy for Asia, just political maneuvering.

This was the essence of the convention, the essence of Nixon's acceptance speech, and the essence of his victory in the 1968 presidential election. What Nixon did was to ally himself with the majority of the nation, dodge the political issues, and appeal to the values of prime-time television. "As we look at America, we see cities enveloped in smoke and flame," he stated in his acceptance speech. "We hear sirens in the night. We see Americans dying on distant battlefields abroad. We see Americans hating each other; killing each other at home." And yet, he continued, there is "another voice" in this anarchic wilderness, "it is a quiet voice in the tumult of the shouting. It is the voice of the great majority of Americans, the forgotten Americans, the nonshouters, the nondemonstrators." In this speech, Nixon confirmed that he would represent the moral majority, the "decent people" who "work . . . pay taxes . . . care." In other words, he would not represent the dissident youth or the rioting blacks, but those for whom "the American dream has come true."²¹

"Since Nixon has no chance of attracting either" the youth or black vote, Vidal concluded, he "served notice" in his acceptance speech

that he is the candidate of that average forty-seven-year-old voter who tends to dislike and fear the young and the black and the liberal; in fact, the more open Nixon is in his disdain of this one-fourth of a nation, the more pleasing he will seem to the remaining three-fourths who want a change, any change, from Johnson-Humphrey as well as some assurance that the dissident forces at work in American life will be contained.

²¹ Richard Nixon, acceptance speech at Republican Convention, August 7, 1968. Cited Chester, Hodgson, Page, *American Melodrama*, 555, 557.

For Vidal, this is in essence what Nixon represented. The nation did not want to address the social anarchy that had metastasised throughout the decade and then burst onto prime-time television in the aftermath of the January Tet Offensive. "One of the pleasures of American politics," Vidal remarked of the convention, "is that, finally, only personalities matter." In the end, it was Nixon who proved to have the right personality for the job at hand. With his "strange uncharm" he was the underdog who represented the forgotten Americans who were themselves rendered underdogs by the 1960s liberal establishment and their cavalcade of protesters.²²

In his book *The Selling of the President 1968*, Joe McGinnis wrote that in an age governed by the techniques of advertising, "the citizen did not so much vote for a candidate as make a psychological purchase of him."²³ In electing Nixon president, the American people purchased the fantasy of Miami Beach, of Reagan's Carverville, of John Wayne's law and order. It showed, as Godfrey Hodgson wrote, that although the most were "troubled by the moral implications of war, riots, crime, and pollution," they nevertheless "refused to see these things, as a vocal minority insisted they must, as proof of a deeper, more general flaw."²⁴ When Nixon called for a "new leadership" he envisioned a day when "Americans are once again proud of their flag," and when "we will have freedom from fear in America and freedom from fear in the world."²⁵ His eulogy to the forgotten American harked back to the golden age of consensus in which he had been the vice president. What Vidal saw was that, in the age of television, the political process need be nothing more than a fiction which would enable the country to withdraw from Vietnam without threatening the rule of the corporate state or the idea of the powerful empire. The legacy of this fiction was that American history was divided into party politics and

²² 'The Twenty-Ninth Republican Convention,' *US*, 844, 847.

²³ Joe McGinnis, *The Selling of the President 1968*, 1969 (1970), 20.

²⁴ Hodgson, *America In Our Time*, 367.

²⁵ Nixon, acceptance speech. Cited Chester, Hodgson, Page, *American Melodrama*, 555, 557.

the actual rule of the industrial class. He perceived that television guaranteed this division and incapacitated any promise of change.

AN EVENING WITH RICHARD NIXON AND THE LEGACY OF THE NIXON ERA

In his analysis of the 1968 Republican Convention, Vidal wrote that with Nixon it is “never easy to determine what if anything [he] means.” The only way to understand him was to measure his current words against previous ones. In his acceptance speech Nixon pledged “an honorable end” to the war in Vietnam and the beginning of “an era of negotiation.”

But in case that sounded like dangerous accommodation he quickly reminded us that since the American flag is spit on almost daily around the world, it is now “time we started to act like a great nation.” But he did not tell us *how* a great nation should act. Last January, he said that the war will only end when the Communists are convinced that the U.S. “will use its immense power and is not going to back down.” In March he said, “There is no alternative to the continuation of the war in Vietnam.”²⁶

What therefore did an honourable end to war mean? It certainly did not mean the withdrawal the peace movement demanded. In a crucial paragraph, Vidal therefore wrote that

[i]f Nixon’s reputation as the litmus-paper man of American politics is deserved, his turning mauve instead of pink makes it plain that the affluent majority intend to do nothing at all in regard to the black and the poor and the aged, except repress with force their demonstrations, subscribing not so much to the bland hortatory generalities of the platform and the acceptance speech but to the past statements of the real Nixon, who has said, (1) ‘If the conviction rate was doubled in this country, it would do more to eliminate crime in the future than the quadrupling of funds for any governmental war on poverty.’ (2) ‘I am opposed to pensions in any form, as it makes loafing more attractive to [*sic*] working.’ (3) To tie health care to social security ‘would set up a great state program which would inevitably head in the direction of herding the ill and elderly into institutions whether they desire this or not.’

²⁶ ‘The Twenty-Ninth Republican Convention,’ *US*, 848.

Underneath Nixon's vagaries were the same old syllogistic politics of the anti-Communist crusader. His discovery of the silent majority, and the subsequent invention of a new Nixon, were nothing more than a smokescreen for a right-wing politician with definite ideas. This led Vidal to conclude that "there is no new Nixon, only the old Nixon experimenting with new campaigning techniques in response, as the Stalinists used to say, to new necessities."²⁷

For Vidal, such manipulation epitomised the new era in American politics. The age of Nixon represented an attempt to return to the lauded hegemony of the 1950s, to the fiction of an America the beautiful defined by the global frontier of anti-Communism. Nixon's stance was rendered all the more unreal for it blatantly ignored political realities and retreated into the Cold War fiction of the great invincible democracy. That the people were prepared to accept this led Vidal to note this wilful ignorance of politics "plays into the hands of the politician. He can reinvent himself every day."²⁸ In Spring 1971 Vidal started to write the play *An Evening With Richard Nixon*, an assessment ^{of} Nixon's political career from his birth in 1913 to date.²⁹ It is an endeavour to demythologise the image of the new Nixon on the principles set forth in the essay 'The Twenty-Ninth Republican Convention.' Each political stand is measured against previous ones to show the extent of his opportunism. In an age dominated by television, Vidal concluded, this would be the most effective form of political opposition.

²⁷ Ibid., 849.

²⁸ *An Evening with Richard Nixon* (1972) ix. Herein *Evening*.

²⁹ At this time, Vidal was deep into his research for the historical novel *Burr* (1973). This followed the publication of *Two Sisters: A Novel in the Form of a Memoir* in 1970. While *Two Sisters* is punctuated with political comment, its main theme of identity is not, and so I have not written about it here.

An Evening With Richard Nixon opened on Broadway, April 30, 1972.³⁰ The play is compèred by George Washington, with a running commentary by Eisenhower and Kennedy. Washington is there to represent the idea of a nation whose “true policy,” as he described it in his farewell address of September 17, 1796, “is to steer clear of permanent alliances, with any portion of the foreign world.” Eisenhower and Kennedy are there to provide commentary on their association with Nixon, and on the real creation of the empire behind the closed doors of national politics. “The idea,” Vidal wrote, “came to me after much brooding on the national amnesia. I decided that I would put into a single two-hour entertainment the thirty-seventh President’s career, using his own words—and those of others. At the end of this narrative it won’t be possible for anyone to say, Oh, I’m sure he never said that about China, or Truman, or price controls.”³¹

Phase One represents the career from birth to Nixon’s self-proclaimed last press conference after his failure to win election as Governor of California in 1962. Vidal has fun with Hannah Nixon’s story that her son responded to the Teapot Dome scandal with the words “I would like to become a lawyer—an honest lawyer who can’t be bought by crooks.”³² He shows that, on the contrary, Nixon’s career was financed by the industrial class and founded on a calculated manipulation of the truth. His campaign for election in 1946—in which he was portrayed as the patriot who fought the enemy in the Solomons, and his opponent, Jerry Voorhis, portrayed as a Communist sympathiser who endorsed a socialistic level of federal control—is represented as the first in many over-simplifying twistings of the truth. His constant running for office, and his indefatigable attack on Communism at home and abroad,

³⁰ Prior to the Broadway run, Vidal published the play in book form. The play was not a public success, and ran for only seventeen performances.

³¹ *Evening*, x.

³² *Ibid.*, 10.

is established as nothing less than the product of a killer instinct and a yearning to win.

It is in Phase Two that Vidal assesses the difference between the new Nixon and the old, and the political legacy of the Nixon era. The new Nixon of 1968, who foresaw an era of negotiation, is depicted as a man with the history of a devoted hawk. In 1952 he rejected appeasement as the path to the “eventual domination of all Asia;” in 1954 he endorsed taking “the risk *now* by putting American boys” in Vietnam; in 1964 he stated “[t]here is no substitute for victory in South Vietnam;” and in 1967 he concluded that “[t]he decision to go to war was right and history will regard it so.”³³ It was in 1967, moreover, that Nixon noted his consistency. He maintained that if he were to run for the presidency he would not go in for “high-powered public relations,” nor would change his convictions, such as his stand on Vietnam, “for political reasons.”³⁴ Vidal then shows how each conviction was transformed in 1968: Nixon states that as a Quaker he could never be “an extremist, a racist or an uncompromising hawk.”³⁵ He also commits himself totally to the command of his PR team. The essence of this attack is not simply that Vidal demanded political consistency from Nixon. It is to show that at the back of the vagaries he started to deliver in 1968 there was the old Nixon, who had only in 1965 advocated the talk of negotiation as a sure way “*not* to get Communists to the conference table.”³⁶ In such a way Vidal raised the question of how could such a man bring an “honorable end” to the war.

The real aim of the Nixon presidency, Vidal argued in *An Evening With Richard Nixon*, was not to end the war, but to sustain the power of the corporations.

³³ Ibid., 31, 42, 79.

³⁴ Ibid., 78.

³⁵ Ibid., 82.

³⁶ Ibid., 75.

To do this dissidence had to be controlled and the fiction of America the beautiful sustained. When the campus peace movement announced a monthly moratorium “in order to speak and work against the war,” Nixon and Agnew inaugurated an attack on organised dissent.³⁷ Vidal quotes Nixon’s response to the moratorium—“Under no circumstances will I be affected whatsoever”—and has Washington follow that it forced Nixon into action.³⁸ His most significant move was the announcement that he would deliver a critical statement on Vietnam on November 3. “He then sent the vice president on a tour of the South,” Washington states, “to say what ought to be said.” What ought to be said was nothing less than an attack on the peace movement and any opinion other than that of the silent majority. “A spirit of national masochism prevails, encouraged by an effete corps of impudent snobs who characterize themselves as intellectuals,” Agnew stated. He denounced the demands of the peace movement as “not only unsound but idiotic,” and argued that its members should be separated from society “with no more regret than we should feel over discarding rotten apples from a barrel.”³⁹ In his choice of quotations, Vidal demonstrates that the Agnew rhetoric was nothing less than fascist. It used the language but not the meaning of democracy.

Television, Vidal demonstrated throughout, was Nixon’s principal weapon. At the pinnacle of the attack on dissent was the censure on the television networks. This followed Nixon’s November 3 address. Nixon first tried to answer the key question, “How and why did America get involved in the Viet-Nam in the first place?”⁴⁰ He first repeated the official rationale for the war:

³⁷ Garry Wills, *Nixon Agonistes*, 1970 (1971), 355.

³⁸ *Evening*, 102.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 102, 103.

⁴⁰ ‘Richard M. Nixon on Vietnamization,’ November 3, 1968, *Major Problems*, ed. McMahon, 432.

Fifteen years ago North Vietnam, with the logistical support of Communist China and the Soviet Union, launched a campaign to impose a Communist government on South Vietnam by instigating and supporting a revolution . . .⁴¹

Vidal fades Nixon out at this point in order to return to Eisenhower and Kennedy. He has Kennedy repeat the terms of the 1954 Geneva Accords, which promised free elections for the whole of Vietnam, and quotes Eisenhower's recollection that eighty percent would have voted for Ho Chi Minh. "We could not allow that, of course," Vidal has Eisenhower qualify.⁴² Vidal uses the quotation from Eisenhower to counter Nixon's claim of self-determination. Of the public reception of the speech, Garry Wills wrote that Nixon "had nothing new to say in policy terms—just excuses."⁴³ Stephen Ambrose likewise wrote that "by announcing that he was going to continue doing what he had been doing for nine months, all Nixon did was to divide the nation more deeply than ever."⁴⁴ Herbert S. Parmet offered an alternative viewpoint when he wrote the speech was effective in that to a "jaundiced and war weary" nation it was "the most explicit elaboration yet heard."⁴⁵ That it was a distortion was immaterial. Nevertheless, the television commentators, and in particular Averell Harriman, Johnson's negotiator at the Paris peace talks, dismissed the speech claiming there was nothing for them to interpret. Agnew used this response as an excuse to censure the television networks before the second moratorium and march on Washington on November 15.

It was the censorship of the television networks, Vidal demonstrated in *An Evening With Richard Nixon*, that was the great legacy of the Nixon administration. While Nixon publicly stood above the uproar Agnew attacked the networks. "There

⁴¹ Ibid.; *Evening*, 103-104.

⁴² Ibid., 104.

⁴³ Wills, *Nixon Agonistes*, 357.

⁴⁴ Stephen Ambrose, *Nixon: The Triumph of a Politician* (1989), 310.

⁴⁵ Richard S. Parmet, *Richard Nixon and His America* (Boston, 1990), 581.

is a new Nixon," Vidal has Kennedy state. "And his name is Agnew."⁴⁶ In the classic Nixon style, Agnew defended the right of any American to disagree with the president, yet qualified that the president had the right to address the nation without the interference of "hostile critics" before his words "can even be digested." He then outlined the power wielded by the networks, which he described as a "power over American public opinion unknown in history." Yet this power, he noted, was wielded by a "small group of men."⁴⁷

They draw their social and political views from the same sources. Worse, they talk constantly to one another, thereby providing artificial reinforcement of their shared viewpoints.

When he asked how many demonstrations would happen if the people did not know the "ever faithful" television crews would be there, Vidal has Washington comment "Agnew seemed to think that television had invented the peace movement."^{*} The networks, who had been provided with a transcript of the speech before it was delivered, carried it live. On November 15, two days later, not a single minute of the march on Washington was screened. Furthermore, of 150,000 letters, telegraphs and telephone calls responding to the speech, two-thirds were in support of Agnew.⁴⁸ "The idea that television is in any way radical," Washington qualified, "is perhaps the most ingenious creation of the Nixon fighting, socking, rocking tactics."⁴⁹ For Vidal, television is not in any way radical because, like the federal government, it is inextricably tied to the centres of economic power. Nevertheless, the Nixon administration made it seem so, and thus further concentrated the threads of power.

This, in the end, is what *An Evening With Richard Nixon* is about. In the first act, Nixon is on stage mashing potatoes. He is "not enjoying" it, the stage direction

⁴⁶ *Evening*, 75.

⁴⁷ 'Spiro T. Agnew Assails the Television Networks for Biased Coverage,' November 14, 1969, *Major Problems*, ed. McMahon, 532, 533.

⁴⁸ Daniel Schorr, *Clearing the Air*⁷⁶ (Boston, 1977).

⁴⁹ *Evening*, 105, 106.

^{*} *Evening*, 105.

reads, “just grimly doing his duty,” and yet he carries on until Washington tells him to stop. This is, in a political sense, what Nixon did. His concerns—his opposition to pornography, his anti-marijuana stand—were small potatoes. When he is faced with anti-war demonstrators on the steps of the Lincoln memorial he can therefore only ask questions about their home football teams. This is moreover, Eisenhower notes, the fate of the president. “[T]hings are in motion when we arrive,” he states, “so, like it or not we have to move *with* events.” The dictatorship Vidal had long talked of is not that of the individual, but that of the advanced capitalist system itself. The president, who is dependent on the financial support of the corporation, is part of this but does not guide it. When the question “who cut down that cherry tree?” is asked at the end Eisenhower answers, “we all did.” The play then draws to a close with “a happy jazzy version of the national anthem” set against screened images of “bombs exploding in Asia,” and “the flag in shreds.”⁵⁰ It is the entire system that is in disrepute, Vidal maintains, and it is on this legacy that Nixon built his career on. At the end of *An Evening With Richard Nixon* Vidal can envision no solution for a country so institutionalised.

THE LEGACY OF THE PROPERTY PARTY

To inform his politics of opposition throughout the 1970s, Vidal did not subscribe to a political ideology. Unlike Norman Mailer, who was attached to the politics of the New Left, he declined to follow any movement. Moreover, Vidal found the politics of the New Left too indeterminate.⁵¹ The movement was more suited to Mailer for as a political philosophy it represented cultural revolution as the province of the working class. In his 1960 “Letter to the New Left,” C. Wright Mills described the

⁵⁰ Ibid., 10, 132, 133.

⁵¹ See the preceding chapter, note 106.

intellectual as “a possible, immediate, radical agency of change.” He went on to endorse the idea of the intellectual as a “cultural workman.”⁵² This idea, Michael Denning wrote in *The Cultural Front*, “became a powerful New Left ideology of the radical intelligentsia.”⁵³ Vidal, on the other hand, continued to write about the history of the nation and its rulers. As Donald Pease wrote of *Washington, D.C.*, he “supplemented the oppositional politics of the counterculture with an historical consciousness it otherwise lacked.”⁵⁴ The conclusion Vidal reached was that “[p]olitical corruption has been with us since the first congress sat in Philadelphia,” and that nothing can be done about it for “as election costs mount the corruption will tend to be institutionalised by the small group of legislators and bankers who own and govern the United States, Inc.”⁵⁵ As a political commentator, he in effect took a Populist stand against the industrial class. Yet unlike the Populist ideologues he could find in the age of Jefferson a time when the exceptional ideal flourished.

In what is arguably the most important essay he wrote throughout the early 1970s, ‘Homage to Daniel Shays,’ Vidal charged that it was the father of the *idea* of America, Thomas Jefferson, who presided over the institution of the corporate state. Jefferson’s dream society was agricultural, and “without large cities, heavy industry, banks.” Yet in political terms, Vidal continued, there are two incarnations of Thomas Jefferson. In his first inaugural (1801), it would seem that Jefferson had won the ideological fight with Alexander Hamilton, an advocate of “industry, banks, cities, and a military force capable of making itself felt in world politics,” and he therefore endorsed a limited government and limited taxes. In his second inaugural (1805), Jefferson espoused a far more Hamiltonian view of the federal government, describing the extensive uses to which taxes could be applied: “rivers, canals, roads,

⁵² Cited, Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front* (1996), 112-113.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 112.

⁵⁴ Donald E. Pease, ‘America and the Vidal Chronicles,’ *Writer Against the Grain*, ed. Jay Parini (London, 1992), 263.

⁵⁵ ‘H. Hughes,’ *US*, 899. (*NYRB*, April 20, 1972.)

arts, manufactures, education” in time of peace, and military expenditure in time of war. The change, Vidal wrote, was explained by nothing less than greed.

Like his less thoughtful countrymen, Jefferson could not resist a deal. Subverting the Constitution he had helped create, Jefferson bought Louisiana from Napoleon, acquiring its citizens without their consent; he then proceeded to govern them as if they had been conquered, all the while secretly—comically—maneuvering, by hook or by crook, to bag the Floridas. The author of the Declaration of Independence was quite able to forget the unalienable rights of anyone whose property he thought should be joined to our empire . . .

Jefferson, Vidal wrote, presided over the transition of America as “an empire *in posse*” to “an empire *in esse*.” The Jefferson-Hamilton debates of the late 1700s were, in other words, buried as early as Jefferson’s first administration. Out of government he could be an idealist, and yet as its head, Vidal charged, he inaugurated the trend toward a “military machine which in the last fiscal year cost us honest yeomen 75.8 billion dollars out of a total 126 billion dollars paid in personal and corporate income taxes.”⁵⁶ The legacy of the current political state was, therefore, his.

Consequently, in the historical novel *Burr* (1973), Vidal does not find exceptionalism at the core of American history, but an overriding protection of the rights of property owners. *Burr* spans the years 1775-1840. The narrative incorporates the reports of the fictional journalist Charlie Schuyler from 1833 to 1840, and the recollections of Aaron Burr. In orthodox history, Burr is the villain. In 1804, while vice president to Jefferson, he killed Alexander Hamilton in a duel, and in 1807 he was accused of plotting to dismember the United States. For Vidal, Burr is a counterpoint to the orthodoxy.⁵⁷ “Our people have always preferred legend to reality,” Burr writes in his memoir, “as I know best of all, having become one of the

⁵⁶ ‘Homage to Daniel Shays,’ *US*, 909, 908. (*NYRB*, August 10, 1972.)

⁵⁷ Vidal’s family is connected to Burr through his mother’s marriage to Hugh D. Auchincloss. Vidal has said he was “Burr-conscious at an early age” due to this connection, *Views From A Window*, 113.

dark legends of the republic, and hardly real.”⁵⁸ Through him Vidal portrays the Founding Fathers as a group of land owners committed to the protection of their property rights. Their true colours were shown when Daniel Shays led a revolt against the government. Shays demanded a realisation of the *true* spirit of the revolution, of a division of property and freedom from a tax-levying government. Vidal has Burr recall in his memoirs that, in 1791, Washington told him it was then

apparent that we must have a strong government to protect our property. Mr. Hamilton concurred with me and we summoned a constitutional convention at which I, at great personal sacrifice, let me say, presided. I regard, Sir, that convention as the most important event of my own career. Because had we not created this federal government, *they* would have taken away *everything*.⁵⁹

This conspiracy theory protected the rights of property and denied “the right of the people to alter or abolish” a government which does not represent them.⁶⁰ It was thus, as Vidal elucidated in ‘Homage to Daniel Shays,’ that “the Property Party was born and with it the Constitution of the United States.”⁶¹

Government in the 1970s, Vidal was therefore led to conclude, is of and by the Property Party. Through the social network of the ruling class, and *its* ownership of corporations, newspapers, television stations, public opinion is determined by its edicts. In ‘Homage to Daniel Shays,’ Vidal discusses the findings of the sociologist G. William Domhoff in *Who Rules America?* (1967), *The Higher Circles* (1970), and *Fat Cats and Democrats: The Role of the Big Rich in the Party of the Common Man* (1972).

Domhoff’s thesis is straight forward. The country is governed by a small elite who know pretty much what it is up to and coordinates its various moves in foreign policy and the economy. Most academics dispute this theory. They tend to be Jefferson I types who believe that the United States is a pluralist

⁵⁸ *Burr* (London, 1973), 98.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 147.

⁶⁰ ‘The Declaration of Independence.’

⁶¹ ‘Homage to Daniel Shays,’ *US*, 913.

society filled with all sorts of dominations and powers constantly balancing and checking one another. To them, anyone who believes that an elite is really running the show is paranoid.⁶²

In this statement, Vidal summarises what he was increasingly up against as a political commentator: the *idea* of America is intrinsically resistant to the understanding that it is ruled by an elite. Thus as Vidal's work throughout the 1960s was an endeavour to find something beyond the confines of exceptionalism, his work in the 1970s was an endeavour to describe the extent of elite control.

As Domhoff explained in *The Higher Circles*, the pluralist view, which is in so many ways representative of the popular view Vidal countered, is that history is shaped by forces beyond the control of any specific group. To think otherwise is to be a conspiracy theorist. Yet what he concludes at the end of a narrative which describes in detail the interconnection between the upper class and the infrastructure of government is that "a relatively small number of very rich people and their academic advisers . . . decide how best to make money from and take advantage of these developments for their own narrow ends." Although this power elite, "consists of thousands of people rather than several dozen" who "do not meet as a committee of the whole," they are ideologically "more unified, more conscious, and more manipulative than the pluralists would have us believe, and certainly more so than any group with the potential to contradict them."⁶³ What both Domhoff and Vidal conclude is that the Democratic and Republican parties are two separate wings of the one main party: the Property Party. Educated in the same private schools which, as Domhoff noted in *Who Rules America?*, "replaced the family as the chief socializing agent of the upper class," the ruling class think in the same terms about the nature of the capitalist system.⁶⁴ This is the nature of the conspiracy.

⁶² Ibid., 910.

⁶³ G. William Domhoff, *The Higher Circles*, (1970), 1971.

⁶⁴ G. William Domhoff, *Who Rules America?* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1967), 16.

Furthermore, it is the media, Domhoff concludes, which facilitate this conspiracy. The media, he wrote, play “an important role in shaping the American polity,” and “in determining the framework within which decisions are made.” The power of the economic elite over this framework is twofold. “The most pervasive,” Domhoff writes, is “corporate advertizing.” Also, members of the upper class own the media, as represented by aristocratic families such as the Chandlers, who own *The Los Angeles Times*, and the Ochs descendants who own *The New York Times*. Of the three television networks, furthermore, all were owned by members of the power elite at the beginning of the ‘70s: Leonard Goldstein of ABC, William S. Paley of CBS, and Richard W. Sarnoff of NBC (who had also married into the aristocratic banking family the Warburgs).⁶⁵ The effect is far-reaching. Thus did Vidal conclude that there is no promise of an alternative. “[T]hose who promote economic equality,” Vidal wrote, “should not be surprised to have their heads handed to them, particularly by a ‘free’ press which refuses to recognise any alternative to the way things are.”⁶⁶ The legacy of the property party is a social system that is constrained to endorse the interests of the advanced capitalist state.

THE WATERGATE CONTROVERSY AND THE RESURRECTION OF MYRA BRECKINRIDGE

As a result of Nixon’s relentless, unrestrained war on dissident opinion, the workings of the Property Party were threatened with exposure. On June 17, 1972, five men were arrested in the act of breaking into the headquarters of ^{the} Democratic National Committee in the Watergate complex. The men were charged with burglary, conspiracy, and wire-tapping. It transpired that the leaders, G. Gordon Liddy and Howard Hunt, were former CIA agents, and had ties to the Nixon organisation CREEP

⁶⁵ Ibid., 80, 81, 83.

⁶⁶ ‘Homage to Daniel Shays,’ *US*, 913.

(Committee to Re-Elect the President). Nixon was philosophical. He wrote in his memoirs that after the 1972 election he “felt sure” that Watergate “was just a public relations problem that only needed a public relations solution.”⁶⁷ This public relations solution comprised of an extensive cover-up, yet further intimidation of the media, and, as Daniel Schorr wrote, Nixon’s repeated attempts “to achieve a new ‘Checkers comeback.’ ” Television was again the medium through which he would try to enlist the silent majority against the machinations of the press, and, as Schorr noted, “to overwhelm the accumulating evidence” against him.⁶⁸ To Vidal, the Watergate scandal was of interest for the extent to which it revealed the political corruption that was now his subject, and, more importantly, the interdependence between the president and corporate state.

On April 17, 1973, the day Nixon overturned resistance to the Senate investigation into the Watergate affair by announcing that his aides would testify before the Ervin committee, Vidal started to write *Myron*.⁶⁹ “I felt that the fall of Nixon had to be celebrated,” he later said, “and I also felt that Myra had to come back.”⁷⁰ *Myron* is a battle between Myra Breckinridge and Myron, now “a square member of the silent majority,” for control of their shared body.⁷¹ The book opens as the diary of the post-transsexual Myron Breckinridge, who records that he has been torn from his home with Mary-Ann and their terriers in the San Fernando valley in 1973 and landed on set of the 1948 MGM “turkey” *Siren of Babylon*, ostensibly one

⁶⁷ Richard Nixon, *RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (1978), 773.

⁶⁸ Schorr, *Clearing the Air*, 100.

⁶⁹ ‘Myron Breckinridge,’ GVC, Box 103, Folder 7.

⁷⁰ Christopher Bryant, interview with the Gore Vidal, October 7, 1997.

⁷¹ I am quoting from the first edition of *Myron*, London: Heinemann, 1975. 105. The revised version is somewhat different. In response to a 1973 ^{Supreme Court} ruling that each state had the right to decide what constituted smut, and therefore what could be banned, Vidal, “[w]anting in every way to conform to the letter as well as the spirit of the Court’s decision,” removed the “pornographic” element by substituting “clean” words for the “dirty” ones [vii]. “In this novel I have replaced the missing bad words with some very good ones indeed: the names of the justices who concurred in the Court’s majority decision. Burger, Rehnquist, Powell, Whizzer White and Blackmun fill, as it were, the breach” [vii-viii]. The original edition also contains a section on Nixon and Watergate removed from the later revision.

of the first films sold to television after its failure at the box office.⁷² No sooner is he there than Myra wrenches control and declares “it was I who pushed Myron Breckinridge into *Siren of Babylon*.” Myra engineers this return to 1948, “the most crucial moment in the history of the motion picture industry when, thanks to television, the studio system is about to go down the drain, taking with it Andy Hardy, Maisie, Pandro S. Berman, Esther Williams—everything, in fact, that made America great.” Vidal therein stages a fight between the pre-war political idealism that reached a pinnacle on the cinema screen and the political mediocrity which he believed characterised the age of television. Through this fight he demonstrates how the American dream had been diminished throughout the Cold War, and how, through the calculated use of the media, Nixon undermined the whole idea of the exceptional state.

In his second incarnation, Myron is a product not of the Hollywood of his youth, but of the television era. He is an archetypal Nixon voter born from the conservative instincts that led first to his physical reincarnation as Myra Breckinridge, and second to his “real self, a straight shooter, living with Mary-Ann the sort of American life that has made this country great.”⁷³ His vision is concurrent with that of Nixon. At the end of *Myra Breckinridge* he lauded Rousseau’s conclusion that mankind would have been happier had it kept to “the middle ground between the indolence of the primitive state and the questing-activity to which we are prompted by our self-esteem.”⁷⁴ In other words, the status quo should rule without the interference of dissidents. “Like the President says,” Myron states at the beginning of his narrative, “the American dream has been won for most of us who

⁷² The original film on which Vidal’s *Siren of Babylon* is based is the 1948 release *Siren of Atlantis*, starring Montez, and her husband Jean-Pierre Aumont. “There was a film called *Siren of Atlantis* made at Universal, with Maria Montez,” Vidal said. “But I had to get on the back-lot of MGM because I know that.” Joyce Harber, ‘Hard-Core Gore Vidal,’ *LAT*, January 5, 1975. Parenthetically, the real name of Maria Montez is Maria Africa Vidal de Santo Silas.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁷⁴ *MB*, 263-264.

work hard and support our country and various community churches and organisations,” in spite of “the heavy burden” of those on welfare, and the “crushing tax burden we have inherited from earlier, socialist-minded administrations.”⁷⁵ Myron is the personification of the silent majority for whom the Nixon television presidency had defined the American dream in the 1970s.

Myron lands on the set of *Siren of Babylon* on April 17, 1973, in his time frame. He finds that he is, in effect, on the other side of the television set rather than in 1948 proper. His movements, and those of the others from the future, are constrained by the eight-week shoot of *Siren of Babylon*. He can, furthermore, only travel with a certain radius of the shoot. On his arrival, Myron is asked to give an update to the other colonists by the head of the operation, the mysterious Mr. Williams, who arrived in 1950 when the film was first shown on television. “You’ll find much interest in the sordid affair at the Watergate,” Mr. Williams instructs Myron, “and a certain scepticism about Mr. Nixon’s protestations of peace with honor in Vietnam.”⁷⁶ Myron observes the official line. He is the superlative constituent of the silent majority who would not have questioned Nixon when he stated that the cease-fire on January 27 had in fact bought “peace with honor.”⁷⁷ Nevertheless, it is on the Watergate affair that Vidal concentrates. For this purpose Myron is the product of a nation informed and defined by what is screened on television. “A lot of people asked questions about Watergate,” Myron writes of the meeting. He consequently did his best to recall what the news anchor Walter Cronkite had been telling them. “I defended our president from a number of allegations of the sort that I can’t imagine any American who loves his country would allege or countenance.” A true-blue American, he remains convinced that neither Nixon, nor the Attorney General John Mitchell, knew anything of the break-

⁷⁵ *Myron*, 4-5.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 62-63.

⁷⁷ Stephen Ambrose, *Nixon: Ruin and Recovery* (1991), 56-57.

in. His politics are apathetic because they are defined solely by an unquestioning consumption of the information screened on television.

It is the arrival of the FBI agent J.D. Claypoole on May 9 that fits the Watergate crisis into the overall critical perspective of *Myron*. The fictional Claypoole is an agent fired in the aftermath of the resignation of L. Patrick Gray, acting director of the FBI, on April 6. In February, Nixon had put forward Gray to be the permanent director of the Bureau after the death of J. Edgar Hoover. In his confirmation hearings at the Senate, Gray changed the direction of the Watergate investigation. He told that the President's counsel John Dean had been informed at each step of the FBI investigation. Then, "day after day," in the words of *The Washington Post* journalists Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, "Gray attested to the ineptitude—if not the criminal negligence—of his supervision of the FBI's investigation."⁷⁸ This reached a climax on April 27 when *The New York Daily News* ran the story that Gray had destroyed files taken from Howard Hunt's White House safe by John Dean. On the same day, at the trial of Daniel Ellsberg, the former government employee who had leaked *The Pentagon Papers* to *The New York Times*, it emerged that Hunt and Liddy had supervised a break-in at office of Ellsberg's psychiatrist in August 1971. The aim was, as Theodore White wrote, to obtain "slander material" which Nixon's hatchet-man Charles W. Colson "could feed the press."⁷⁹ In a section dated May 9, 1973, in the original manuscript, Claypoole arrives to report all the information made public at the trial of Ellsberg.

Myron is, of course, dubious. He concludes that Claypoole "could very well be a Communist agent in disguise coming back to 1948 to sell America short by betraying our president." If anything, this is a testament to the indoctrination in

⁷⁸ Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward, *All the President's Men*, 1974 (London, 1974), 274.

⁷⁹ Theodore White, *Breach of Faith* (London, 1975), 150.

which the Nixon political antics from the 1940s onward had played such an important part. Claypoole first reports that a number of the president's advisers had resigned for their roles in trying to cover up the break-in. Myron sceptically writes that

[a]llegedly they were working for the President in order to reelect him by a large majority, which seems peculiar right off since I don't know anyone this side of Van Nuys in the Valley who was not a Nixon man all the way. *

Myron's confusion is indicative. As a television-informed member of the silent majority in the traditional conservative stronghold of Orange County he *knows* that the opposition to Nixon is only from a concentrated group of subversive radicals. Furthermore, the "Nixon defense," as Stephen Ambrose noted, relied on the "oft posed question: Why should Nixon take chances when he knew that he was a sure-thing in the 1972 election." This, he continued, depended on "the public's short and faulty memory," who would forget that it was not until mid-July that Nixon registered a substantial lead in the polls.⁸⁰

Myron is, nevertheless, floored by the subsequent revelations. The first is the story on the Ellsberg break-in; the second is that John Dean "is afraid he will be killed by the President's friends when he tells the true story;" and third is that Nixon had ordered J. Edgar Hoover to wire-tap his staff and the newspaper men in receipt of the leaks. He is only confused further when Claypoole links these events with Nixon's visits to Moscow and Peking. "[T]o tell the truth a lot of folks in the Valley were stunned, yes, shook up when our president visited the two centres of the monolithic Communist world conspiracy."⁸¹ As Robert Scheer wrote, "Nixon's

⁸⁰ Ambrose, *Triumph of a Politician*, 561-562.

⁸¹ *Myron*, 138-139. For some reason—libel?—Vidal does not use the real names of Ellsberg and Dean. He has Myron write Daniel Burgsell and Dean Rusk. It is clear who the real persons are; it is nevertheless odd that Vidal should use the name of Dean Rusk, who was Secretary of State under both Kennedy and Johnson, and a keen advocate of the Vietnam war. It could be a comment on Myron

* *Myron*, 137-138

foreign policy had destroyed the rationale for his domestic one.”⁸² It made no sense to a country ideologically vaccinated against the Communist fever. So just as Myron would think Claypoole a Communist, so Claypoole levels the same rather unlikely claim against Nixon, who now acted “on orders from his masters in Moscow and Peking.”⁸³ In *Myron* Vidal is demonstrating how the rationale for the Nixon television image was collapsing under his political opportunism.

While Myron is dedicated to finding a way out of *Siren of Babylon*, Myra is there to rewrite history. Throughout *Myron*, Vidal endeavours to resolve the crisis at the end of *Myra Breckinridge*. Myra’s mission is consequently more definite. First she will return MGM to its former glory, and second she will “simply restructure the human race . . . through a complete change in man’s sexual image.” In response to the scandals of 1973, Vidal recreates her mission as an attack on political corruption. “It is,” Myra writes in *her* opening chapter,

no coincidence that the accident which put me out of commission in 1967 was directly responsible for the presidency of Richard M. Nixon, the current energy and monetary crises and the films of S. Peckinpah. I do not exaggerate: *All these disasters are a direct result of my removal from a scene which I was on the verge of transforming entirely.* Proof? Without me everything has gone haywire.⁸⁴

Myra’s talent to syllogise is evident from her first words. Yet she is not in this incarnation a resurrected Bobby Kennedy. She is a Richard Nixon, who was politically resurrected in 1968 by *his* challenge to the crisis of confidence. “My fellow Americans,” she thunders, “central to my vision is the street where Andy Hardy once lived and will live again. If I succeed in this great enterprise, I vow to you that the moral rot at the centre of the United States will be nipped in the bud.” In

himself, except that this substitution standard throughout the text, excepting the names of the Supreme Court judges and Jack Kerouac.

⁸² Robert Scheer, *America After Nixon*, (1974), 6.

⁸³ *Myron*, 139.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

an age when Nixon would address his “fellow Americans” at each turn of the political screw this is no accident. Her tone, and her vision of a media at her command, is a reflection of the Nixon strategy. Furthermore, the strength of Nixon’s political image was founded on his literal reflection of the silent majority. In an attempt to recreate a culture committed to the economic policies of the Cold War and the lawless male-bonding of Peckinpah films, Myra’s objective is to recreate that majority through the restoration of Hollywood and rededication of television to “the glorification” of that product and “the creation of longer and even more inventive commercials.”⁸⁵

In *Myron*, Myra discovers exactly where she failed in her quest to recreate the sexes. She concludes that her first mission failed because it “did not go far enough.” By raping Rusty she fulfilled her psychological criteria but not her messianic criteria. “I realise now that in my petty selfishness I was deliberately denying others what I was so quick to claim as my own *re*-birth rite,” she theorises, leading her to reason “I *un*manned the American male when I should have *de*manned him.”⁸⁶ With her hand on the crotch of her new project, the unsuspecting linesman she dubs Half-Cherokee, Myra realises that to make her doctrine real, she must recreate him as an ideal. “I shall present him to a grateful world as a gorgeous, fun-loving, sterile Amazon, an Indian princess made for good times but not for breeding.”⁸⁷ The path to power, she realises, is not through the individual recreation of an archetype but in harnessing the omnipotence of the cinema as a vehicle to the creation of new dreams. Her ultimate vision is a Nixonian use of the mass media so that it would reflect not the values of Nixon but those of herself.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 144, 145.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 77

⁸⁷ Ibid., 78

Myra's response to an era of crisis is founded on the original idea of an American exceptionalism. Like the Founding Fathers Vidal described in 'Homage to Daniel Shays' and *Burr*, she envisions the recreation of the nation state through her revolutionary rhetoric. Her objectives embody the American tradition of the reconstitution of the body politic to supersede a corrupt government. In restoring the power of Golden Age Hollywood over the imagination, and re-establishing MGM under her direction "as principal purveyor of the world's dreams", she declares that "I—and I alone—shall determine *what* is dreamed by the human race."⁸⁸ For Myra, Hollywood had responded to the threat of television "in the wrong manner. Instead of increasing the 'pure' Hollywood product, [MGM chief of production] Dore Schary is trying perversely to 'upgrade' the product."⁸⁹ To return Hollywood to its position as "the source of all this century's legends" would enable her to "reshape past, present and future in my own image as there can be no other if we are to survive as the regnant species." Her proposed solution to the crises of the 1970s rests on her control of the power to define the way in which Americans understand the knowledge and principles on which their society is based. She grandly asserts that by returning to 1948 and changing the history of the media she surpasses the "prime mover himself as I weave this cage of old time."⁹⁰

Myra's conception of her own messianic status hinges on this grand idea of supplanting the "prime mover." This idea was her undoing in *Myra Breckinridge* for she saw the prime mover as *death*. Yet in *Myron* it is ultimately her making for she understands, as Eugene Luther did before her, that it is only through the redefinition of *life* that one can become the author of history. By defining the cage of interpretation, "through whose radiant bars only I can view eternity just as I am now—at this very instant—creating the cage itself," she effectively supplants the old

⁸⁸ Ibid., 177

⁸⁹ Ibid., 129.

⁹⁰ *MB*, 10; *Myron*, 177, 176.

god of Western civilisation by becoming the Word. On this principle she would present the world with her new creation, “the sterile fun-loving Amazon” Stephanie Dude, her new project after Half-Cherokee bolted. Through the film of his transformation, *Stefanie!*, and a calculated use of the fourth estate, she would make her “the ideal identity for every red-blooded American boy,” and “a living solution to the problem of overpopulation (not to mention this century’s restless search for sexual identity).” This messianic vision reaches its natural climax with her proposed seizure of Hollywood and the subsequent rebirth of Steve Dude, for in the American tradition of national recreation, Myra, like the Founding Fathers before her, becomes the Word that forges a society in its own image. “For I am, let us face it once and for all, the Embodiment of Necessary Mutancy on the verge of creating a superrace, in my image.”⁹¹

Through Myra, Vidal argues that the only way to revolutionise a society like the United States is not to change its political ideology but to change its dreams. As a product of the Golden Age of Hollywood, Myra is a political activist because the cinema fuelled her dreams, and, moreover, because she understood the war years as “the last moment in human history when it was possible to possess a total commitment to something outside of oneself.”⁹² The Golden Age was for Myra a time when social and political idealism was conceivable. In the age of television, the character of Myron suggests, an understanding of politics outside of the tribe is meaningless. Thus although he does not endorse the small-town morality of the Andy Hardy films, and is aware that there is an equivalent indoctrination at work, Vidal does see in the Golden Age of cinema the very possibility to reanimate the American tradition of revolution. In returning to 1948, to a time before the ascendance of television, Myra demonstrates that the most effective way to change society would

⁹¹ Ibid., 77, 132, 94, 52.

⁹² *MB*, 59.

be to release that potential. Whether Vidal endorses this conclusion or not, this activism certainly realises his vision of the post-war years as a time in which American exceptionalism promised a release from the social and political constraints of tribalism. *Myron* is, moreover, a fantasy, the fictional realisation of a possibility, and it is through Myra that Vidal demonstrates how American society was defined by its media fictions. Salvation is still the province of the good Caesar, but it is a standard removed from television and the shrinking of the great American experiment to the small screen. Although Vidal does not envision a way out of the crisis, he does suggest that for the American dream to work it has to be far greater than that of Nixon's conservative silent majority.

Writing in the *Pacific Sun Quarterly* on the publication of *Myron* in late 1974, Richard Piro concluded that this "latest entry into bestsellerdom" is "at times embarrassing because of the already outdated Nixon-Watergate references." In seeing only the jokes, he misses the point that the references to Watergate are an integral part of the thematic structure. Piro, like so many reviewers of both *Myra Breckinridge* and *Myron*, cannot get a handle on the satire. His conclusion is that it is mere "knowledge in search of a showcase."⁹³ Likewise, in one of the more intelligent reviews, Robert Mazzoco concluded that *Myron* is plagued by "weightlessness." "It's hard to know what, beyond his usual interest in the Grotesque, that Vidal is really after here."⁹⁴ Yet what the references to Watergate achieve is an understanding of how the political system worked, and about how the fiction of democracy in Cold War America is sustained.

⁹³ Richard Piro, 'Myra again,' *Pacific Sun Quarterly*, November 14-20, 1974.

⁹⁴ Robert Mazzoco, 'The Charm of Insolence,' *NYRB*, November 14, 1974, 13.

In May 1973, Vidal wrote that the scandals themselves revealed “only the tip of not an iceberg but a glacier.” (This analysis was borne out in the Senate investigation, throughout which the extent of control exercised by the secret government was laid bare.) He concluded that he did not think that “the American system in its present state of decadence is worth preserving,” and yet added “I am certain that a majority of my countrymen would like things to continue pretty much as they are. If they do, then their only hope is the prompt impeachment and dismissal of this president. A ritual scapegoat is needed to absolve our sins and Nixon has obligingly put his head on the block.”⁹⁵ For Vidal, the whole Watergate scandal was ultimately about the maintenance of a fiction. The rulers in effect proved to be back in control of their wayward executive throughout the scandal. First the idea of the imperial presidency was attacked in a book by the faithful Arthur Schlesinger, and a series of articles written by John Herbers were published in *The New York Times*. Second, Congress introduced the War Powers Act to limit the power of the executive to finance a war without an official declaration from Congress. The Act, “unthinkable in the forties and fifties and sixties,” wrote Stephen Ambrose, “looked to be unstoppable in 1973.”⁹⁶ Watergate proved to be an end to Nixon’s pretensions, and on August 9, 1974 he finally resigned from office, thus proving a scapegoat for the ills of a system that had veered out of control. The nation could be left to assume that the system worked.

Myron is a handbook on how to fool the people. In its conclusion, it is also a statement on where Vidal stood as a political activist at this stage in his career. Although Myra ostensibly fails in her mission, she has the last laugh. When Myron is returned to 1973 it is clear that her intervention in 1948 did yield results. Nevertheless, the television generation Myron, who has no memory of yesterday,

⁹⁵ ‘Political Melodramas,’ *US*, 856.

⁹⁶ Ambrose, *Ruin and Recovery*, 61.

writes “this country is just like it was no matter what the Com-symp senator from Massachusetts John Kennedy says as he starts his race for the President by unfairly taking advantage of Mr. Nixon’s current misfortunes.” He adds that the average American will not buy his radical line, and that his only qualification is being the brother-in-law of Marilyn Monroe, “as our good governor and next Republican President Stefanie Dude, the fun-loving Amazon, said last night in a television interview.” In her restricted victory, Myra prevented the Kennedy presidency. It would seem that she also prevented the election of Ronald Reagan to the governorship of California. Vidal’s point, written on July 29, three days after Nixon first refused to release his taped conversations in the Oval Office, is that there has to be hope within the current crisis. Myron’s coda, a repeat of his final sentiment in *Myra Breckinridge*, is that the silent majority “are not going to let anybody, repeat *anybody*, change things from what they are,” is therefore not allowed to stand. The final chapter is simply the mirror-writing “!sevil aryM.” In the end Myra Breckinridge is biding her time, as is Vidal the political activist.⁹⁷

THE SECRET GOVERNMENT

Following the resignation on August 9, 1974, the effectiveness of the Nixon scapegoat proved to be shortlived. In late September, the investigative journalist Seymour Hersh started to publish a series of articles in *The New York Times* which demonstrated that, as Vidal had contended, Watergate was only the tip of an iceberg.

⁹⁷ *Myron*, 243, 244. There is, of course, another dimension to this. As Catharine Stimpson argued, *Myron* is “an obituary for contemporary literature.” ‘My O My O Myra,’ *Writer Against the Grain*, ed. Jay Parini (London, 1992), 187. Whittaker Kaiser the cook is Norman Mailer, still floundering in the excesses of his masculinity. (This achieves explicitly what was implicit in *Myra Breckinridge*.) Nemo Trojan (Maude) the hairdresser is Truman Capote. (In an early unpublished lecture, Vidal wrote that a Capote novel is like a window display. He has merely rearranged the works of other people. GVC, Box 33, Folder 1. In *Myron* Vidal is saying that Capote is far more of a hairdresser than a novelist.) Mr Williams is Henry James, who is out to destroy Hollywood and its hegemony over the word. At the end it is Vidal the writer who lives and the others who are condemned to repeat old forms in much the same way as they reexperience *Siren of Babylon* again and again and again.

Hersh outlined the abuses of power practised by the CIA, the FBI, and the hitherto secret NSA. From clandestine operations in Chile to a programme of domestic surveillance, what he described threatened to reveal the workings of the intelligence network and the unrestricted power of the secret government.⁹⁸ The Congressional investigation mounted in response to the stories therefore only increased the widespread crisis of confidence. From the inconclusive war in Vietnam, to the environmental crisis, the energy crisis, and the crisis in government, the social and political identity of the United States foundered.

As a result, Vidal described a 1974 lecture tour in which he delivered *his* state of the union address as “whistle-stopping with *large* crowds of masochists, lusting for my whip!”⁹⁹ This address was published as ‘State of the Union’ in *Esquire* the following May, and is a comprehensive indictment of the conditions that engendered the decline and fall of the United States. The core problem, he argued, is that the nation is in effect a police state. From the policing of “private morals” to the relentless battle against Communism, what the state claimed to be and what it actually is are therefore independent of each other. “The right to pursue happiness—as long as it does not impinge upon others—is the foundation of our state,” he wrote, and yet, through its official and secret police forces, the state consistently limited such pursuits. He argued that from the prohibition against consensual sexual acts to gambling and the use of drugs, the laws under which the police and the secret agencies operate are contrary to the *idea* of America. This is equalled if not surpassed by empire, which for Vidal was nothing but “the pumping [of] federal money into companies like Boeing and Lockheed.” The result, he concluded, was a national schizophrenia. The people therefore respond to the failure of the war in

⁹⁸ Schorr, *Clearing the Air*, 150. Kathryn S. Olmstead, *Challenging the Secret Government*, (Chapel Hill, 1996), 1-2, 12.

⁹⁹ ‘Just Between Cousins,’ Letters of Gore Vidal and Louis Auchincloss, ed. Fred Kaplan, *The New Yorker*, 9 June 9, 1997, 85.

Vietnam and the corruption revealed by Watergate “with the only epithets they can think of, provided them for generations by their masters: it’s the Commies, pinkos, niggers, foreigners, it’s *them* who have somehow screwed it up.”¹⁰⁰

The real problem, Vidal continued, is that the people “have no idea who the enemy” is. “No one has dared tell them that the mysterious *they* are the rich who keep the consumers in their place.”¹⁰¹ This is the fundamental point of the essay. The organisation of the social hierarchy is a conspiracy designed to inhibit the pursuit of happiness to all but a privileged few. In his homage to the bicentennial, 1876, Vidal concluded that the disregard of the Constitution had long been the policy of the rulers. As he summarised in the essay ‘President and Mrs. U.S. Grant,’ “[d]uring Grant’s presidency, the Constitution was simply an annoyance to be circumvented whenever possible.”¹⁰² The corruption of the Grant administration and the scandals of the 1876 election, as with the corruption of the Nixon administration and the election of 1976, were inapplicable to the idea of America. Yet it was still through a fictional idea of America propagated in the media that Cold War America was sustained.

In the 1970s, Vidal concluded, the rulers of the country, the “four point four percent” that Domhoff described, governed most effectively not through the federal bureaucracy but through television. The “principal weapon” in the protection of ruling class interests, Vidal maintained, is “the television commercial. From babyhood to the grave the tube tells you of all the fine things you ought to own because other people (who are nicer looking and have better credit ratings than you) own them.”¹⁰³ His argument was that the power of television to police the nation is

¹⁰⁰ ‘State of the Union: 1975,’ *US*, 923, 926, 937. (*Esquire*, May 1975.)

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 937.

¹⁰² ‘President and Mrs. U.S. Grant,’ *US*, 718. (*NYRB*, September 18, 1975.)

¹⁰³ ‘State of the Union: 1975.’ *US*, 933.

far more effective than the secret machinations of the FBI, CIA, NSA. The revelations of Watergate and “son of Watergate,” the subsequent investigations into the intelligence network, did not herald a change in the system for power was sustained not by the federal government but the corporate economy. Vidal concluded that the only prospect for change was in the very collapse of an economy geared toward the maintenance of the rich. As a political activist he could only describe the legacy of the new era of television, the failure of the war in Vietnam, and the fall of Richard Nixon. As a writer of fiction he could only foresee a future in the comprehensive breakdown of the current system.

The breakdown of this system is the theme of Vidal’s “apocalyptic extravaganza” *Kalki* (1978).¹⁰⁴ Vidal started to write the novel in November 1976. Its narrator was originally a female-to-male transsexual, Ted Ottinger. “It was as if I had built a house and left out the staircase,” Vidal later said of this draft.¹⁰⁵ In March 1977 he started a complete rewrite with the narrator as thirty-five year old “aviatrix” Theodora (Teddy) Ottinger. Her story charts the rise of J.J. Kelly, a Vietnam veteran from New Orleans who claimed that he was Kalki, the ninth incarnation of Vishnu. In Hindu mythology the appearance of Kalki signalled the imminent conclusion to the present cycle of creation. That the end is nigh is no revelation to Teddy. Like her creator, she sees a world in which “everything is out of control: population, the weather, the cells of each and every body. Things seemed to be converging in a disastrous way.”¹⁰⁶ Kalki becomes a name in America as a result of free Lotus Lotteries, which promised cash prizes between now and The End, and a calculated use of the media. Teddy is sent to Kathmandu to interview Kalki at his request. She is then persuaded to work for Kalki

¹⁰⁴ R.Z. Sheppard, ‘Elegant Hell,’ *Time*, March 27, 1978.

¹⁰⁵ Mickey Friedman, ‘The end of the world, as told by Gore Vidal,’ *San Francisco Examiner*, May 8, 1978, 24.

¹⁰⁶ *Kalki* (London, 1978), 19.

Enterprises as a pilot, and is told that she is one of the five Perfect Masters who will remain after The End. Teddy is sceptical throughout, yet she is instrumental to Kalki's work. On a world-wide flight she distributes Lotus Lottery tickets that are, unbeknownst to her, laced with the toxin *Yersinia enterocolitica*. This enables Kalki to bring the world to an end. In *Kalki* Vidal is far more despondent about the future of America, and indeed the world, than in any of his previous fictions. "Everything is irreversible. We're witnessing the end of industrial civilisation as we know it," he stated when the book was published.¹⁰⁷ It is, in this sense, characteristic of his approach to the state of the union throughout this period.

Kalki describes an America debilitated by the social and political aftermath of the war in Vietnam and the energy crisis. The legacy of Nixon's "peace with honour," and the eventual victory of Hanoi in April 1975, was that the war had been to little effective purpose. For the country, as for the Vietnam veterans, there was no precedent for a lost war and therefore in effect there was no cultural framework in which it could be understood. As Marilyn Young wrote in *The Vietnam Wars*, when soldiers returned from the Second World War the "purpose and significance of what they had done was universally affirmed and most were able to accept it. This was not the situation for Vietnam veterans, for even those who came home to families or communities who approved of the war were aware of those who protested against it."¹⁰⁸ Furthermore, the Great Oil Embargo of 1973, a protest against US support of Israel in the Yom Kippur war, gave rise to an energy crisis which only added to the understanding that the United States was no longer the hegemonic world power.¹⁰⁹ There was a sense, too, that even more people had lost faith in the political process. In the 1976 election 54.4^{percent} of the electorate voted. "And had Carter not been from

¹⁰⁷ Bob Schildgen, 'Gore Vidal. "This Is The End Of Our Society," ' *Berkeley Barb*, May 12-18, 1978, 3.

¹⁰⁸ Marilyn B. Young, *The Vietnam Wars 1945-1990* (1991), 322.

¹⁰⁹ Stephen E. Ambrose and Douglas G. Brinkley, *Rise to Globalism*, Eighth Edition (London, 1997), 263.

the South,” as Jules Witcover noted, “the turnout probably would have been lower; voters in eleven Southern and border states went to the polls at rates higher than the national average.”¹¹⁰ It is within this collapse of the idea of American sustained throughout the Cold War that Vidal sets the rise of the Kalki phenomenon.

The search for a meaning in the wake of the political and economic crises of the 1970s is the driving force behind *Kalki*. “[T]he seventies,” Teddy writes, “were a perfect time to start a religion.” She describes the prevailing mood of the country as eschatological, and concludes “sects that promised to save a few souls before the coming disaster were popular.” The “young and interchangeable Americans” drawn to Kalki were, much like the first television-generation students in Buck Loner’s Academy, “like androids, waiting to be switched on”.¹¹¹ As the sociologist Stephen Tipton reasoned, it was the disaffected counter-culture of the ‘60s that was drawn to cults in the ‘70s. In this time, he wrote, “many youths sought out alternative religions and therapeutic movements. Here they found a new way to both cope with the instrumental demands of adulthood in a conventional society and to sustain the counterculture’s expressive ideals by reinforcing them with moralities of authority, rules, and utility.”¹¹² It therefore also offered to contain what the sociologist Alvin Toffler termed “ ‘future shock’ . . . the shattering stress and disorientation that we induce in individuals by subjecting them to too much change in too short a time.”¹¹³ The cult opened a new frontier of experience, and yet, as with the religion of Cavesword in *Messiah*, this new frontier was determined by the idea of death.

Nevertheless, this is not the ideological point it was in *Messiah*, a novel in which Vidal was working out his idea of America. The overriding popularity of

¹¹⁰ Jules Witcover, *Marathon: The Pursuit of the Presidency, 1972-1976* (1977), 644.

¹¹¹ *Kalki*, 67, 22, 67.

¹¹² Stephen M. Tipton, ‘The Moral Logic of Alternative Religions,’ *Religion in America: Spirituality in a Secular Age*, eds. Mary Douglas and Stephen Tipton (Boston, 1982), 84.

¹¹³ Alvin Toffler, *Future Shock* (London, 1971), 12.

Kalki was not defined by the meaning of Hinduism, as Vidal's '50s America is defined by Cavesword, but by Kalki as a superlative entertainment. "Whether or not they believed in him," Teddy writes, proved "not the point." From the Lotus Lottery to the launching pad of the television chat show, Kalki is pure showbusiness. "[H]e's about the biggest thing that's hit Hollywood Hills since what's-his-name walked on the moon," enthuses top television salesperson Arlene Wagstaff. Kalki is interviewed by Mike Wallace for the CBS show *60 Minutes* in a teaser for the rally at Madison Square Garden, at which Kalki would announce the date of The End. The rally, Teddy writes, is "mixture of show-biz and religion," billing four rock bands and Kalki's end-of-word rap, "complete with flute and sitar." The rally brings Kalki's message to the whole country and secures maximum publicity for The End. Yet even when the date is revealed, Arlene tells Teddy, "I've been reading about and listening to this end of Hollywood shit for thirty or twenty years, and I'm here to tell you that entertainment is here to stay!" It is the visual media that reigns supreme, and in the social and political context of 1970s America all other considerations pale into insignificance.¹¹⁴

Kalki is not about ideology but about the power of advertising. Consumerism is the real religion. As the historian Daniel Boorstin argued, the language of advertising is the language of the frontier.

[A]s expansion and novelty have become essential to our economy, advertising has played an ever-larger role: in the settling of the continent, in the expansion of the economy, and in the building of an American standard of living. Advertising has expressed the optimism, the hyperbole, and the sense of community, the sense of reaching which has been so important a feature of our civilization.¹¹⁵

The advertisement is the blue-print for an American lifestyle. The power of television advertising is therefore the power to provide both meaning and practical

¹¹⁴ *Kalki*, 140, 22, 141, 126, 118, 175.

¹¹⁵ Daniel J. Boorstin, 'The Rhetoric of Democracy,' *American Mass Media*, eds. Robert Atwan, Barry Orton, and William Vesterman (1978), 42.

solutions to clearly defined problems. Vidal's paradigmatic invention, the Jedda Coffee commercial, demonstrates this. Starring Arlene Wagstaff, the commercial screens a sluggish housewife, "complete with neurotic frown," who is unable to summon the energy to vacuum her home. Equipped with a cup of Jedda Coffee brought to her by a friendly neighbour she is "[n]o longer catatonic," and thus "pilots her vacuum cleaner like a jet."¹¹⁶ The product *is* the solution. And as Martin Esslin wrote in his 1979 essay 'Aristotle and the Advertisers,' "the coffee playlet" is indicative of the dramatic structure of advertising. "In the first beat the exposition is made and the problem posed . . . In the second beat a wise friend or confidant suggests a solution . . . The third beat shows a happy conclusion." He concludes that "the close analogy to the *deus ex machina* of classical tragedy is inescapable."¹¹⁷ What is therefore important, as McLuhan said of the televised politician, is not necessarily the product, but "the process."¹¹⁸ The Kalki phenomenon is the ultimate product *and* process. He is the *ultimate* solution to the problems of overpopulation and pollution. To avert the ecological or nuclear tragedy that would end the human race his *deus ex machina* is to destroy it, and only after the act of destruction to save it.

Like Myra Breckinridge, Kalki uses the weapons of corporate America against its own interests. From the publicity machine and the secret workings of the CIA to the Bureau of Narcotics and the clandestine research into chemical warfare, Vidal is interested in showing how the ruling class is sustained. He outlines the extent of this control by staging a conflict between the corporate sector and Kalki Enterprises over the state machinery. From the free Lotus Lotteries, the twenty-thousand billboard

¹¹⁶ *Kalki*, 7

¹¹⁷ Martin Esslin, 'Aristotle and the Advertisers: The Television Commercial Considered as a Form of Drama,' *Television*, ed. Horace Newcomb, third edition (1982), 263

¹¹⁸ McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 321.

posters proclaiming The End, the *60 Minutes* interview, to the rally in Madison Square Garden, Kalki utilises the media to publicise his apocalyptic message. Yet what Teddy learns on her flight to New Delhi in order to interview Kalki for *The National Sun* is the beginnings of his intricate and extensive conflict with the clandestine workings of the U.S. government.

On the flight, Teddy is joined by the dubious Dr. Ashok, whom she presumes to be a CIA agent. Ashok tells her that Kelly had been involved in the sale of narcotics from his time in the army's Vietnam Medical Corps. In 1968 he mysteriously disappeared, only to return eight years later to claim that he was Kalki. Ashok issues the standard Cold War reasoning for understanding the relationship between the drug-pusher and the god. He labels Kalki a political pawn. "A society weakened by drugs and by a false belief in the world's magical end," he claims, "could not protect itself against communism." High as a kite in the Kathmandu Blue Moon Tea House, he asks the incredulous Teddy why, if Kalki was "sincerely living out the legend," had he incorporated as Kalki Enterprises and invested in real estate across America?¹¹⁹ The answer, of course, is that he means to destabilise the United States in the interest of the Communist philosophy. Yet what the investigation into Kalki's alleged drug running is about is not the moral issue of drugs, but about the protection of the economic and political investments of corporate America.

It is this, Vidal argues, that explains the existence of the FBI, CIA, the Bureau of Narcotics. From "Operation CHAOS," the domestic spying programme that kept track on the foreign contacts of Vietnam dissidents, to the testing of drugs such as LSD on "uninformed subjects," they exist to secure the hegemony of the state and its institutions.¹²⁰ In the 1970 essay 'Drugs', Vidal had described the Bureau of

¹¹⁹ *Kalki*, 28, 48.

¹²⁰ Schorr, *Clearing the Air*, 150.

Narcotics as a racket. He wrote that federal laws prohibiting the illegal sale of certain drugs are as essential to the survival of the Bureau as they are to the Mafia, “because if drugs are sold at cost there would be no money in it for anyone.” “[F]ighting drugs,” Vidal qualifies, “is as big a business as pushing them,” and their illegal sale, coupled with the fact that “[t]he American people are as devoted to the idea of sin and its punishment as they are to making money,” justifies funding for the Bureau’s activities.¹²¹ Again he maintains that the country is ruled through the exploitation of prejudice.

In *Kalki*, Vidal determines the political meaning of such insights through the connection between the Narc Jason McCloud and Senator Johnson White. White is Chairman of the Senate Narcotics Control and Abuse Committee, who, true to America’s role as world policeman, were mounting an investigation into the world drug scene. “[Y]ou’ve got to help your country,” White demands of Teddy, whom he wants to testify that Kalki is indeed a drugs entrepreneur. “And you’ve got to help those poor kids who’ve been hooked on brown sugar.” Yet for White, the hounding of the Kalki drug racket is a secure moral stand with the assurance of television coverage. When confronted by Teddy with White’s drug allegations, Kalki’s business partner Dr Lowell (who, disguised as CIA agent Dr. Ashok, worked to keep tracks on White’s moves) assures her that the sole aim of the crusade was to increase “the publicity for their committee meetings.”¹²² The intention, he continues, is to elect White to the presidency.

Television exposure is crucial for any politician to survive under their present system, Teddy writes. Statistically an ambitious Senator must get, “at least once a year, thirty to forty seconds on the 6:00 news.” It is furthermore preferable to be side

¹²¹ ‘Drugs,’ *US*, 642, 643.

¹²² *Kalki*, 111, 101.

by side with the paternal Walter Cronkite, “the most trusted man in the nation because for each of five nights a week he nicely read the news for a total of seven minutes.” Political survival is determined by the extent to which a statesman was screened on the familiar environment of television. This demonstrates to Teddy why that “parasitic trade” took up so much time on chat shows, “avoiding subjects and otherwise projecting personalities best left unprojected.” The politician, like the celebrity with a book to sell, had to fight for airtime. Teddy therefore views the vagaries of the political game as an irrelevant sport. “The so-called power brokers of that day never knew what was important,” she explains. Consequently “there was almost no serious analysis of the Kalki phenomenon in the press. As of March 15, the hot subject was whether or not the President would replace the Vice President.”¹²³ The papers concentrated on the game of personality politics as television concentrated on the game of celebrity.

Kalki’s steady cruise through the media is to the despair of Senator White. “White looked ready to cut his wrists,” Teddy writes of his pain when faced with Kalki’s billboard campaign and his eleven minutes and half minutes on *60 Minutes*. Beyond the official rhetoric of the corporate politician, White is only interested in the promotional aspect of Kalki’s achievement on the media stage. He can snappily answer one aspect of Teddy’s perennial question, “what is the connection between Kalki the god and Kelly the drug merchant?” “[R]eligion is tax exempt.” Yet he cannot answer the correlative question, why Kalki?, “[w]hy the end of the world?” “It’s catchy,” White responds. The combination of the billboards, the Lotus Lottery, and the announcement of The End is a guarantee to publicity, to get the country talking, he claims. When the end, as White sees it, inevitably does not come, Kalki would have “had a good run for his money,” which would yield greater benefits for

¹²³ Ibid., 108, 7, 140.

the presidential campaign of Senator Johnson White after the highly publicised indictment of Kalki the drug dealer.¹²⁴

This congenital inability to understand the problems caused by the post-war society is at the core of Vidal's satire. Teddy, like Vidal, is aware that "[t]hings were running down and negative entropy was on the war-path." Conversely the power-brokers of the day are not. As Senator White stewes over the publicity Kalki has generated, Teddy responds, "I think Kalki's serious. I think he really believes the end of the world has arrived. We're running out of energy and food. There are too many people, too much pollution. . . ." White cuts her off, concluding that such predictions are "just plain old-fashioned Commie horse shit," and part of a conspiracy to halt the expansion of "the greatest industrial plant in the world."¹²⁵ The only reality for the politician, and especially one who wishes to be president, is to ensure the autonomy of the corporate sector. Nevertheless, according to a 1976 government report, the United States, with only 6^{percent} of the world's population, in fact used over a third of the world's energy.¹²⁶ Vidal had reported a similar statistic in 'State of the Union: 1975.'¹²⁷ The energy crisis was therefore far more significant than a conflict over the control of oil. With an expanding population, energy needs were expected to quadruple by the year 2000. In 1977 an average of 333,000 babies were born each day, compared to only 134,000 deaths. Moreover, from 1960 to 1975 the world's population had increased from two and a half billion to four billion. It is as the product of such a crisis that Vidal envisioned the end of the world.¹²⁸

¹²⁴ Ibid., 110, 85, 111, 112.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 22, 113.

¹²⁶ Fred C. Allvine and Fred A. Tarpley, Jr, 'The New State of the Economy: The Challenging Prospect,' *US Economic Growth from 1976 to 1986: Prospects, Problems, and Patterns*, Studies for the Joint Economic Committee of the US Congress, (Washington, D.C., 1976), 58.

¹²⁷ 'State of the Union: 1975,' *US*, 930.

¹²⁸ Jeremy Rifkin with Ted Howard, *Entropy* 1980 (London, 1985), 112.

The CBS Evening News on April 2, the last full day in the age of Kali, is described as “pretty much par for the course.”¹²⁹ From reports of increased oil prices, decreased available energy, and the prediction of an ice age by the scientists who had not predicted the greenhouse effect, it was clear to Teddy that “negative entropy was on the war-path.” It is entropy, the second law of thermodynamics, that is Vidal’s rationale for *Kalki*. As Jeremy Rifkin explains in his book *Entropy*, the first law of thermodynamics

states that all matter and energy in the universe is constant, that it cannot be created or destroyed. The second law, the Entropy law, states that matter and energy can only be changed in one direction, that is, from usable to unusable, or from available to unavailable, or from ordered to disordered. In essence the second law says that everything in the entire universe began with structure and value and is irrevocably moving in the direction of random chaos or waste . . . According to the Entropy law, whenever a semblance of order is created anywhere on earth or in the universe, it is done by causing an even greater disorder in the surrounding environment.¹³⁰

The product of order is disorder. That “everything is out of control: population, the weather, the cells of each and every body,” is therefore a product of the order imposed by human society.¹³¹ The United States of America in the 1970s was nevertheless an advertising jungle that shielded the corporate sector from the threat of the ecological movements. Even after the establishment of the Environmental Protection Agency in 1970, the federal government invariably took the side of the industrialist.¹³² In the words of Senator White, what they were concerned with was “a standard of living that is the envy of every Commie and the despair of every Third Worlder” screened on “more hours of free TV than any other nation on earth.”¹³³ In *Kalki* Vidal can only therefore envision an end to the human disorder.

¹²⁹ *Kalki*, 182

¹³⁰ Rifkin with Howard, *Entropy*, 16.

¹³¹ *Kalki*, 19.

¹³² Hodgson, *America In Our Time*, 404.

¹³³ *Kalki*, 113.

It is Teddy who unwittingly brings the human race to its end. On a world-wide flight she distributes 70 million paper lotus flowers in a final super-lottery. Unbeknownst to her, the flowers are impregnated with a virulent strain of virus *Yersinia enterocolitica* which Kelly had isolated in his work for the chemical warfare division in Vietnam.¹³⁴ Through the use of a staggered dose, Kalki delivered his kiss of death on April 3, while notching up an unprecedented Nielsen rating of 49.0. The final third of the book is a description of Kalki and his four companions, who have been inoculated against the virus, after *The End*. The final vision is of a new equilibrium in which the ravaged planet stabilises without the interference of four billion human beings.

The reviews of this surprise ending were somewhat predictable.¹³⁵ Jay L. Halio wrote in *The Southern Review* that "Vidal does not think much of our modern societies and therefore has developed a fiction to get rid of them."¹³⁶ Although R.Z. Sheppard described the novel as "diabolically clever" in his review for *Time*, he concluded that it is marked by "a running patter about the things Vidal loves to hate: population growth, women writers who try to write like Henry Miller, hacks, agents, the so-called communications industry, and politicians." In his conclusion that "these subjects are part of the author's reflexology" he gives vent to the idea that the ending is a wish-fulfilment of the author. Yet as Susan Baker and Curtis Gibson rightly point out, the "more serious his purpose . . . the more extravagant are [his] conceits."¹³⁷ Of the reviewers, Clive James in *The New York Review of Books* best understood this proposition. He starts with the idea that it is "Myra Breckenridge

¹³⁴ The pestis *Yersinia* is the agent responsible for bubonic plague, and is characterised by swollen lymph nodes, particularly in the armpit and groin. Enterocolitis is the inflammation of the small intestine and the colon.

¹³⁵ I think the ending is a definite surprise. In both *Myra Breckinridge* and *Myron* there is no clear realisation of a new society. As Clive James wrote on his review, "[t]he new wrinkle is that the apocalypse really happens." Clive James, 'Pensée Persons,' *NYRB*, April 20, 1978.

¹³⁶ Jay L. Halio, 'Violence and After,' *The Southern Review*, Summer 1979, 710.

¹³⁷ Susan Baker and Curtis S. Gibson, *Gore Vidal* (Westport, Connecticut, 1997), 161.

[sic] meets Messiah.” Yet although he wrote that “Vidal can be almost as concerned with the insubstantial pageant as Truman Capote,” he concludes that it is “a considerable book.”

Vidal’s literature inventions have the virtue of blowing some of the cool which as a public figure he is notoriously well able to keep. As soul and body begin to fall asunder, his fictional works must inevitably reveal more and more about what he really wants, feels, and is. It will be a boon but no surprise: so clear an intelligence was bound to be powered by dark fires.¹³⁸

This is an interesting point to raise. James does not simply conclude that the novel is a sadistic wish-fulfilment but that it is Vidal’s darkest view of man’s only hope. Unlike the round-up in *Books & Writers*, which concluded on the note that “Kalki is slight, enjoyable, intelligently trivial,”¹³⁹ James emphasised that it is a labyrinthine meditation on modern America as a threat to the continued survival of the human race.

It is clear as the book draws to a close that Kalki himself *is* modern America. “I destroy in order to create. And preserve,” he informs Teddy.¹⁴⁰ This is also the only discernible rationale at the root of the war in Vietnam. In 1968, when the town of Ben Tre had been destroyed by the American military, an officer explained, “We had to destroy it in order to save it.”¹⁴¹ This irrational rationale for the carnage in Vietnam is for Vidal the unwritten objective of the American empire. Kalki may have destroyed the human race to save it, but his design for a new race fathered by himself is at the same time destroyed. The danger was the danger within. Dr Lowell knew that the blood chemistry of Kalki and his wife Lakshmi could not produce children. Lowell’s alternative plan to father the human is destroyed when Kalki kills him. With his four companions dead by the year 43 A.K., Kalki bequeaths the Golden

¹³⁸ James, ‘Pensée Persons,’ *NYRB*.

¹³⁹ *Books & Writers*, September 1978, 76.

¹⁴⁰ *Kalki*, 217.

¹⁴¹ Cited, Hodgson, *America In Our Time*, 356.

Age to Jack and Jill, two monkeys Teddy had adopted as pets. The lesson of *Kalki* is moral, not just, as Vidal said, “a tip in advance to our leaders.”¹⁴² Yet, at the end of the ‘70s, Vidal was so disillusioned with the idea of America that he could not see a future. Throughout this era there is in his work a sense that the progression from republic to empire was inevitable. The law is not exceptionalism but entropy. “At the end of time, I annihilate all worlds,” the archetypal American J.J. Kelly therefore concludes. “I am Siva.”¹⁴³

¹⁴² Philip Oakes, ‘The Spilling of Gore Vidal,’ *Cosmopolitan*, June 1978, 105.

¹⁴³ *Kalki*, 244.

The Return to Political Activism, 1980-1982

The 1970s were a time of crisis for Gore Vidal in which he could envision no alternative to the current social and political system. In his history of the American revolution, *Burr*, he could find no record of a true golden age. In the subsequent historical novel, *1876*, he demonstrated that the scandals of the Nixon years had only been prefaced by the administration of the eighteenth president, Ulysses S. Grant, one hundred years earlier. Throughout this era, Vidal could not find in the American political tradition an effective countermeasure to the excesses of the empire he denounced in his fiction and political essays. Yet in the research and writing of the historical novel *Creation* (1981) he started to reassess his political heritage and to understand that it represented an alternative to the current impasse.

CREATION AND THE RESTITUTION OF VIDAL'S SOUTHERN HERITAGE

After the publication of *Kalki* in April 1978, Vidal started to write *Creation*. “[H]aving ended the world,” he said in 1981, “I’ve now gone back to the origins of all our systems of thought.”¹ *Creation* is an historical novel set in the fifth century BC. Its narrator is the fictional Cyrus Spitama, grandson to the prophet Zoroaster. “For me,” he states at the beginning of his chronicle, “there is only one subject worth pondering—creation.”² The problem for Cyrus, Vidal later explained, is that “he gets

¹ Michiko Kakutani, ‘Vidal: “I’m at the Top Of a Very Tiny Heap,”’ *NYT*, March 12, 1981.

² *Creation*, 1981 (London, 1993), 12.

hung up on the notion of creation—how it all began.” Through his travels, however, he learns “that he was asking the wrong questions. Western culture is always asking the wrong questions. It’s our fatal flaw.”³ Throughout the course of the book Cyrus confronts four theories of creation, from the teachings of Zoroaster, to Buddha, Confucius, and the Greek sophists. Although he remains constant to Zoroastrian theory on the grounds that it envisions “a definite beginning” to creation, as well as a “definite end,” he admits to his nephew Democritus “[t]here *is* something missing. Something I could not find on this earth in the course of a long life.” That *something*, Democritus writes, is neither religious nor political, but scientific. “Matter is all. All is matter.” There is no single act of creation for all is “constantly created and recreated.”⁴

It is evident that, over and above the historical meditation, the writing of *Creation* had a critical effect on how Vidal reconceived the political heritage which, throughout the '60s and '70s, he thought to have failed him. First, the book is dedicated to his grandfather, T.P. Gore. Cyrus is likewise a blind man describing the history of his country to, in this case, his nephew. Immediately this creates an autobiographical basis for the structure of the narrative. More than that, it suggests that through Zoroaster, Cyrus, and Democritus, Vidal reconceived his own political heritage.⁵ *Creation* is written after a decade of work that censured the history of the United States. Yet by not writing directly about that history, but about the *way* in which it was taught to him, Vidal redetermined how to make use of his heritage as a political weapon. From the start Cyrus establishes himself as a “counterhistorian.” His narrative offers an alternative to Herodotus’ version of “the Persian wars.” In answering him with his account of “the *Greek* wars,” Cyrus counters an

³ Jay Parini, ‘An Interview with Gore Vidal,’ *Writer Against the Grain*, ed. Jay Parini (London, 1992), 286.

⁴ *Creation*, 630, 631, 656.

⁵ It is interesting to note that, aside from a few references, and most notably the television play *The Indestructible Mr. Gore* (1959), Vidal had not written much about T.P. Gore before this time.

interpretation that in fact determined the place of the wars in history.⁶ What Vidal is also writing is an allegory through which he counters a reading of American history determined from the standpoint of the North.

In *Creation*, Democritus the Greek is instructed in an alternative history by his half-Greek, half-Persian uncle Cyrus. In his youth, Vidal, a child of the North, was instructed in the history of America by his grandfather, a child of the South. The political significance of this lesson is evident in the essay 'State of the Union: 1980.' In this analysis Vidal argued that the Republic had gone through three distinct incarnations. The first "began with the revolution in 1776 and ended with the adoption of the Constitution in 1788." The second was likewise "a fairly loose affair until 1861." Then, at the end of the Civil War, the "third and most imperial republic came into existence."⁷ The Civil War, Vidal concluded, represented the critical dividing line in American history. The victory of the industrial North over the agrarian South represented an end to the political diversity on which the nation was founded: the Civil War determined the historiography through which the country would be understood. Furthermore, from the Eastern seaboard to the frontier, the ideology of the nation would therefore be that of industrial capitalism. This led Frederick Jackson Turner to write that Populism represented "an earlier stage of development in the State. A primitive society can hardly be expected to show the intelligent appreciation of the complexity of business interests in a developed society."⁸ The imperial apologist Arthur Schlesinger said much the same thing in 1969 when he wrote that had the country followed Jeffersonian ideology, "the United States today would be a feeble and impotent country."⁹ Yet in reforging his connection with the Populist heritage of his grandfather, Vidal worked out that an

⁶ Ibid., 41, 3.

⁷ 'State of the Union: 1980,' *US*, 941. (*Esquire*, August 1980.)

⁸ Frederick Jackson Turner, 'The Significance of the Frontier in American History,' *The Frontier in American History* 1920 (1962), 32.

⁹ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Crisis of Confidence* (Boston, 1969), 64.

alternative to the history of empire could be grounded in a tradition of *Southern* exceptionalism.

It was throughout the imperial Cold War era moreover, that the Populist heritage had, as C. Vann Woodward observed, fallen “into disgrace.” Although significant parts of the intellectual establishment embraced this heritage in the 1930s, after the Second World War this trend started to reverse. Of the subsequent criticism, Woodward complained that “the Populists are charged with some degree of responsibility for Anglophobia, Negrophobia, isolationism, imperialism, jingoism, paranoid conspiracy-hunting, anti-Constitutionalism, anti-intellectualism, and the assault on the right to privacy.”¹⁰ Richard Hofstadter in his 1963 essay ‘The Paranoid Style in American Politics’ compared Populist ideas on economic conspiracy to Joe McCarthy’s vision of the great Communist conspiracy. Hofstadter represented the Populist as part of the paranoid tradition on the grounds that instead of seeing conspiracies in history, the paranoid saw history “as a vast and sinister conspiracy, a subtle machinery of influence set in motion to undermine and destroy a way of life.” The fault with this interpretation, Hofstadter continued, is that it is “distinctly personal: decisive events are not taken as part of the stream of history, but as the consequences of someone’s will.”¹¹ Nevertheless, what Vidal came to understand was that, under advanced capitalism, conspiracy was integral to the system rather than guided by the individual. In reembracing his political heritage, he started to work out why the overall significance of the Populist movement superseded the simple dichotomy described by Hofstadter.

While it was true that some Populist ideologues were anti-black, anti-Semitic, and, as Woodward observed, simplified economic problems by turning them “into a

¹⁰ C. Vann Woodward, ‘The Populist Heritage and the Intellectual,’ *The Burden of Southern History* (Baton Rouge, 1960), 143, 148.

¹¹ Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* (London, 1966), 29, 32.

rural melodrama,” their understanding of the social and political abuses of capitalism were of far greater consequence. The Populist movement was principally defined by “agricultural interest politics,” Woodward wrote. “Not only were their anxieties but their proposed solutions and remedies were economic.”¹² Likewise Vidal said of his grandfather that although he was “anti-black and anti-Jew—what they now call nativist . . . his prejudices were all low-key, except the hatred of the rich and the banks.”¹³ It is therefore conceivable to read *Creation* as a belated response to Woodward’s 1959 proposition that for the tradition of revolt to endure, the intellectual “will learn all he can from the new criticism about the irrational and illiberal side of Populism” and yet “cannot afford to repudiate that heritage.”¹⁴ In the political work he was to undertake throughout the 1980s, Vidal did not repeat the irrational obsession with conspiracy theory, but, rather, offered an understanding of how conspiracies operated within the larger system. He did not describe the financial monarchs of the country as a “monopoly of ‘Shylocks’ ”¹⁵ but wrote of the “WASP ascendancy” who “own the country”¹⁶ After *Creation*, the Populist heritage became for Vidal a source of dissidence to wield against the industrial practices of the North. Thus as T.P. Gore had applied the Populist understanding of the social and political system at the end of the nineteenth century to the issues of the twentieth, so would his grandson.

In writing *Creation* moreover, Vidal reenvisioned his heritage not in terms of Gore’s anti-New Deal politics, but in those of his Populist roots. Unlike urban sophisticates such as Richard Hofstadter, he recognised there was far more to Populism than an ideological dalliance “mobilized into action by social conflicts”

¹² Woodward, ‘The Populist Heritage and the Intellectual,’ 154, 153.

¹³ Jon Wiener, ‘The Scholar Squirrels and the National Security State: An Interview with Gore Vidal,’ *Radical History Review* 44 (1989), 114.

¹⁴ Woodward, ‘The Populist Heritage and the Intellectual,’ 166.

¹⁵ Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform* (London, 1962), 75.

¹⁶ ‘Reflections on Glory Reflected,’ *US*, 168–1269. (*Threepenny Review*, Spring 1991.)

which “bring fundamental fears and hatreds, rather than negotiable interests, into political action.”¹⁷ At the end of *Creation*, Vidal’s Democritus writes that “[t]hanks, in large part, to the education that I received from Cyrus Spitama, I have been able in the course of a long life to work out the causes not only of all celestial phenomena but of creation itself.” He resolves that the “something missing” from Cyrus’ understanding of creation is “[m]atter is all. All is matter,” and that creation is therefore “constantly created and recreated.” There is, he concludes, only “atoms and empty space; everything else is merely human thought.”¹⁸ While this is the philosophical conclusion of the historical Democritus, it is also a concise summary of Vidal’s conclusion at the end of writing *Creation*. It suggests that while Vidal would discard exceptionalism as a *religion* he would at the same time embrace his political heritage as a source of dissidence.

THE POSSIBLE RETURN TO POLITICAL ACTIVISM

While working as a television commentator on the 1968 Democratic Convention, a reporter asked Vidal if he “had ambitions to re-enter politics.” He replied, “God, no!”¹⁹ Yet starting in January 1981, the month *Creation* was published in the United States, he started to discuss the possibility of his entering the Senatorial Democratic Primary for California the following year. Vidal outlined his reasons for this thinking in a lecture delivered at Redlands University on January 22. A story by Kenneth Reich was then published in *The Los Angeles Times*.

The story, ‘Gore Vidal, Critic of Voting, May Seek Office,’ is somewhat hostile at the outset. Reich observed that Vidal had not voted since the 1964 election,

¹⁷ Hofstadter, *Paranoid Style in American Politics*, 39.

¹⁸ *Creation*, 631, 656.

¹⁹ Mike Shropshire, ‘The Gore in Chicago,’ *Fort Worth Press*, August 28, 1968.

and had only registered to vote in the state of California (where he had bought a house in 1978) on January 14. Reich had a clear case. In 'The Real Two-Party System,' an attack on the electoral process published the preceding October in *The Los Angeles Times*, Vidal advised the electorate to join him in "the most highly charged political act of all: not voting."²⁰ He reiterated this proposition at Redlands. "I think the system doesn't work at all. I'm hoping that if less than 50% who are registered to vote in the next election, the election will lose all of its legitimacy." Nevertheless, Reich continued, if he ran for election Vidal "would be entertaining at least and thought-provoking as well. Not as much can be said of most candidates." Although Vidal proved ambivalent on the question of his candidacy, he concluded "I have a sense there's a lot of unease in the country and someone who actually said what he was thinking might do well."²¹ In spite of his verdict that the system did not work, Vidal appeared aware that, in practical terms, for him to enter the political arena at this time could yield positive results.

While this return to the political process was a response to the neoconservative Reagan administration, it was also a sign that Vidal had been somewhat reconciled to his own political heritage. "As Vidal tells it," Michiko Kakutani wrote in a *New York Times* article, "he shares the populist views of his grandfather."²² This identification was, as *Creation* would suggest, a declaration that he represented a definitively American political tradition. In one of his campaign mailings Vidal therefore outlined the importance of his background. "I was brought up by my grandfather, Senator Thomas Gore. Thanks to him I have a great deal of respect for what the Senate used to be—and what it should be." He then qualified,

I am not so happy with what it is now. Too few of our elected representatives are willing to lead. Too few are willing to speak out. And too few are courageous enough to speak the whole truth. The Senate

²⁰ 'The Real Two-Party System,' *US*, 954. (*LAT*, October 26, 1980.)

²¹ Kenneth Reich, 'Gore Vidal, Critic of Voting, May Seek Office,' *LAT*, January 25, 1981.

²² Kakutani, 'Vidal: "I'm at the Top Of a Very Tiny Heap." '

should be a place where new ideas are launched. The Senate should also be a place where such old ideas as “freedom and justice for all” are kept alive.²³

These words are indicative of the value Vidal therein placed on his political heritage, and on his qualification both to understand and to re-enter the political system.

Furthermore, as an important feature of his campaign, Vidal maintained that he would be free to follow his convictions, unlike the “[t]he professional politician,” who could not solve the problems he is faced with “because he is part of the problem.”²⁴ In so doing Vidal was clearly drawing on a way of thinking that had led to the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980. Following the administrations of Nixon and Carter, the idea of the professional politician was in disrepute, and Reagan drew political strength from this. He was presented as more of a political outsider, “a mirror to the past,” Lou Cannon wrote, “which told of the days when the White House was the source of the finest leadership in the country.”²⁵ Vidal used this trend to further establish his political qualifications. In March 1981, he stated in an interview with *People Magazine* that “[t]hese are bad times in every sense, and it’s at moments like these that people with fresh ideas about society and how to change it ought to get involved.” He added, “[i]n fact, I may quit writing novels and concentrate on politics before the dummies we’ve got running the country succeed in burning it down.”²⁶ Although he did not declare until March 1982, for the rest of the year Vidal tested his ideas on the lecture circuit. His speech put forward ideas that were to be the core of his campaign. Building on his conclusions in the three essays ‘State of the Union: 1980,’ ‘The Real Two-Party System,’ and ‘The Second American Revolution,’ he denounced an administration that promised “to get the

²³ ‘Gore Vidal for US Senate,’ GVC, M91-032, ‘1982 Campaign Materials,’ Box 4. The majority of the articles quoted are from cuttings housed in the collection and most do not have page references.

²⁴ Interview with Gore Vidal, Jere Real, ‘Gore Vidal, Roman Senator,’ *Inquiry*, May 17, 1982, 10.

²⁵ Lou Cannon, *Reagan* (1982), 368.

²⁶ Christopher Anderson, ‘Don’t Worry That Vidal is Running Out of Oxen to Gore: He Says He’s Running for the U.S. Senate,’ *People Magazine*, March 30, 1981, 52.

government off the backs of the rich.”²⁷ In so doing he took a Populist stand against the machinery of advanced capitalism. In his writing and political activism he would develop a clearer understanding of the elements essential to the maintenance of a society so founded.

STATE OF THE UNION: 1980

For Vidal, the 1980 presidential election had proved to be no more than television entertainment. He observed that in the age of the mass media, such elections are “a bit like the Grammy Awards,” an exercise in trivia that “on prime-time television” bestows the prize of office on an industry favourite, who would in office continue to represent corporate interests. There is, he argued, therefore only one choice in the *real* two-party system, which is divided between the one party “that votes in presidential elections,” and the other “that does not vote in presidential elections.”²⁸ (This proved to be an almost even split. In 1980 53.95^{percent}_^ voted.)²⁹ Yet “[t]o read, hear and watch the media-types, one would think that the election really mattered,” Vidal declared.³⁰ Again, his argument was that the visible machinery of the political system perpetuates the fiction of the United States as a representative democracy. To understand how the system worked in practice, he indicated, one had to therefore understand how advanced capitalism functioned, and the role played by the media in this exercise.

In 1980 the country was in the midst of an economic crisis. In January the official unemployment figure stood at 7^{percent}_^. The Consumer Price Index registered an

²⁷ ‘State of the Union,’ GVC, ‘1982 Campaign Materials.’

²⁸ ‘The Real Two-Party system,’ US, 952.

²⁹ Theodore H. White, *America in Search of Itself*, (1982), 412.

³⁰ ‘The Real Two-Party System’ US, 953.

annual rate of 18.2³¹ ^{percent} What the media coverage concealed, Vidal argued, was the extent to which the needs of those whose tax dollars funded the federal government were subordinate to the demands of the “mindlessly wasteful military establishment.”³² A good example of Vidal’s charge is the fact that in 1979 Carter had approved a \$12 billion increase in the military budget to fund the MX missile programme. This was financed by a cut of \$15 billion from social and domestic programmes. This act, moreover, demonstrated how the political system functioned. Carter’s National Security Council advisor, Zbigniew Brezezinski, told him that without the MX he would not be able to sell the SALT II treaty on Capitol Hill, for opponents of the treaty “claimed that it gave the Soviets significant military advantages.”³³ In other words, disarmament talks proved to be lucrative. It was such practices Vidal had attacked when he wrote that “since the defense budget is at the heart of the Bank’s system of control over the United States, it can never be seriously reduced.”³⁴ The Reagan administration only proved his point when it increased defense spending from the annual \$113 billion under Carter to \$240 billion.³⁵

In the essay ‘State of the Union: 1980,’ Vidal explained that, over and above the media circus through which the people had access to contemporary politics, the banking system was the rock on which the corporate economy was built. “Although the presidents now come and go with admirable speed, the bank goes on forever, constantly getting us into deeper and deeper trouble of the sort that can be set right—or wrong—by its man in the Oval Office.” Opposition to a system of private banks was essential to the Populist revolt. In the Omaha Platform, a private national bank was represented as a threat to the wealth of the people. The Populists proposed that “a just, equitable and efficient” banking system should be instituted “without the use

³¹ Burton I. Kaufman, *The Presidency of James Earl Carter, Jr.* (Kansas, 1993), 167-168.

³² ‘The Real Two-Party System’ *US*, 954.

³³ Kaufman, *The Presidency of James Earl Carter, Jr.*, 153.

³⁴ ‘State of the Union: 1980,’ *US*, 940.

³⁵ James Petras and Morris Morley, *Empire or Republic?* (London, 1995), 9.

of banking corporations.”³⁶ In his mock-presidential aria ‘State of the Union: 1980,’ Vidal reasoned that it was the Bank, “shorthand for the actual ownership of the United States,” which had led the country into its current social and economic crisis. He argued that under the present system there was no promise of a way out, for “[a]lthough the economy is in a shambles and the empire is cracking up, the political system imposed on us by the Bank does not allow any candidate to address himself seriously to any issue.”³⁷ Vidal consequently understood the representation of the democratic process in the media to be a sideshow, and that the corporations had in fact usurped the rule of ‘We the People.’

That the social, political, and economic system is controlled by corporate interests, Vidal observed, was the reason it could not effectively solve problems it had itself created. Again, this was a key Populist stand, for as Richard Hofstadter noted, Populism was designed to “attack seriously the problems created by industrialism.”³⁸ What is more, Vidal argued, “since the Bank owns the media” it “is able to decide who and what is newsworthy and how much deeptalk its depositors can absorb.”³⁹ This aphorism had a clear historical precedent. First, the members of the government’s main advisory boards on foreign and domestic policy were drawn from the corporate sector. In the late 1970s, 64^{percent} of the 201 largest corporations were represented by directorate membership on the Council of Foreign Relations. 90^{percent} of those on the Committee For Economic Development were likewise corporate directors.⁴⁰ Second, in 1979 *The New York Times*, the paper of record, was linked to the corporate boardroom through a network of directorates from the drug manufacturers Merck, to the investment firm/bank Morgan Guaranty Trust, Charter

³⁶ ‘The Omaha Platform,’ *Builders of American Institutions*, eds. Frank Friedel and Norman Pollack (Chicago, 1963), 353.

³⁷ ‘State of the Union: 1980,’ *US*, 939, 941.

³⁸ Hofstadter, *Age of Reform*, 61.

³⁹ ‘State of the Union: 1980,’ *US*, 941.

⁴⁰ Harold Salzman and G. William Domhoff, ‘The Corporate Community and Government: Do They Interlock?,’ *Power Structure Research*, ed. G. William Domhoff, (California, 1980), 235.

Oil, Sun Oil, Bethlehem Steel, and American Express.⁴¹ Public understanding of government policy, as Vidal had argued, was therein determined by a media machine largely owned by the corporate interests who wrote such policy. There could, as a result, be no effective public debate about the energy crisis, environmental issues, or the military budget.

Accordingly, when the economic crisis of the late 1970s was addressed by *The New York Times* the paper reflected corporate thinking. "Two years ago," Vidal wrote in the 1981 essay 'The Second American Revolution,'

The New York Times printed three articles, more in sorrow than in anger, on how, why, where, when did it all go wrong? "The United States is becoming increasingly difficult to govern," the *Times* keened, "because of a fragmented, inefficient system of authority and procedures that has developed over the last decade and now appears to be gaining strength and impact, according to political leaders, scholars and public interest groups across the country."

To Vidal this sounded like "a call for a Mussolini." As to the *Times*' criticism that political parties are little more than "frameworks for nominating candidates," he noted that this is what they have always done, with the "honorable exceptions" of "the first years of the Republican party and the only years of the Populists."⁴² In all other times, he continued, the political parties represented little else than the interests of money.

The conclusions reached in the *Times* nevertheless epitomised the thinking of the corporate sector, and in fact repeated the conclusions of the Trilateral Commission, which Vidal had characterised as "a perfect symbol of the way the United States is ruled."⁴³ The Trilateral Commission, on which Jimmy Carter had served, was established in 1973 by Nelson Rockefeller. In 1975 it published *The*

⁴¹ Ben Bagdikian, *The Media Monopoly*, third edition (Boston, 1990), 25.

⁴² 'The Second American Revolution,' *US*, 958-959. (*NYRB*, February 5, 1981.)

⁴³ 'State of the Union: 1980,' *US*, 939.

Crisis of Democracy: A Report on the Governability of Democracies to the Trilateral Commission. The report concluded that the country suffered under “an excess of democracy.” A result of this excess was that “[t]he questioning of authority” throughout the ‘60s had “pervaded society.”

In politics, it manifested itself in a public decline in confidence and trust in political leaders and institutions, a reduction in the power and effectiveness of political institutions such as the political parties and the presidency, a new importance for the “adversary” media and the “critical” intelligentsia in public affairs, and a weakening of the coherence, purpose, and self-confidence of political leadership.

This decline of authority in the political system led the report’s authors to the totalitarian conclusion that “the democratic temper . . . destroys the bases of trust and cooperation among citizens and creates obstacles to collaboration for any common purpose.” This was, moreover, written in light of the war in Vietnam. “The weakening of authority throughout society,” the report went on, “thus contributes to the weakening of the authority of government.”⁴⁴ It was this argument that sustained the *Times*’ reading of the post-Vietnam crisis of confidence.

Following his outline of *The New York Times*’ stand in ‘The Second American Revolution,’ Vidal examined a list of proposals put forward by Lloyd N. Cutler, counsel to President Carter, to effect changes to the political system. What Vidal found was that the change proposed by Cutler merely reflected the standpoint of the establishment as put forward by the Trilateral Commission and *The New York Times*. He therefore started with Cutler’s “tentative and highly timid” understanding that the United States is not about to incorporate a parliamentary system.”⁴⁵ Cutler, like the Trilateral Commission and *The New York Times* before him, was bothered by what he understood as the inability of the president to govern effectively, for which

⁴⁴ Michael Crozier, Samuel P. Huntington, Joji Watanuki, *The Crisis of Democracy* (1975), 76, 162-163.

⁴⁵ ‘The Second American Revolution,’ *US*, 959.

he offered the example of Carter's difficulties over the ratification of the SALT II Treaty.

[T]here would have surely have been enough votes for fairly rapid ratification if the President could have counted on the total or near-total support of his own party—if, in short, he had truly formed a Government, with a legislative majority which takes the responsibility for governing.

"We cannot fairly hold the President accountable for the successes or failures of his overall programme," Cutler wrote, "because he lacks the constitutional power to put that program into effect." He therefore proposed that because "we live in an increasingly interdependent world" it would be necessary to have a system that could respond "quickly and decisively." Cutler listed a series of remedies, from the election of the president, vice president, and House of Representatives as "a trio of candidates, a team," to the idea that the president select fifty percent of his cabinet from the House. He stopped short of a constitutional convention, an idea Vidal more than favoured, for "because of the concern generated by this proposal" it "is probably a non-starter."⁴⁶ To Vidal this was hardly an answer, and so, he concluded, "whatever change that is made must originate in the government as it now is even though, historically, no government has ever voluntarily dissolved itself."⁴⁷

Vidal dismissed Cutler's conclusion that the president does not have the power to execute his overall programme as "perfect establishment nonsense." The president, he argued, could achieve almost anything "as a result of a series of usurpations of powers that have been taking place ever since . . . 1793." He maintained that, in theory, Carter had the power to implement an effective energy policy "if he had wanted one. What the president cannot get directly from Congress (very little if he knows how to manage those princes of corruption), he can often

⁴⁶ Lloyd N. Cutler, 'To Form a Government,' *Foreign Affairs*, Autumn 1979, 127-128, 128, 133-134, 143.

⁴⁷ 'The Second American Revolution,' *US*, 960. The government of the United States under the Articles of Confederation might, however, be a candidate.

obtain through executive order, secure in the knowledge that the House of Representatives is not apt to exercise its prerogative of refusing to fund the executive branch.” He concluded that “separation of powers is a useful device whereby any sin of omission can be switched from one branch of government to another.”⁴⁸ Vidal is not interested in the fact that, as a Southern politician, Carter experienced numerous difficulties with the predominantly Northern Congress, or that he was the wrong candidate at the decidedly the wrong historical moment to reaffirm the symbolic hegemony of the executive. He is more interested in his long-standing warning that a presidential dictator was still a possibility. Yet as a reflection of the change in his thinking, the dictatorship he described was no longer that of an individual, but one of corporate interests.

THE 1982 SENATORIAL DEMOCRATIC PRIMARY

In March, 1982, Gore Vidal registered his candidacy for the Senatorial Democratic Primary in California. He decided to try for the Democratic nomination like his grandfather before him because, as Fred Kaplan observed, “the People’s Party in 1968 had demonstrated the odds against a third party’s having electoral success.”⁴⁹ At that time the main contender in the Republican primary was Barry Goldwater, Jr., and the main Democratic contender was the two-term California governor, Jerry Brown. Vidal founded his campaign on the ideas advanced in his essays. In his position paper, ‘Gore Vidal: the Serious Alternative,’ Vidal allied Brown with the corporate machine and Ronald Reagan. “[P]oliticians like Ronald Reagan and Jerry Brown,” the paper stated, “serve the contractors, not the people.” Brown, like Reagan, he continued, was therefore in support of the B-1 Bomber “no matter what

⁴⁸ Ibid, 960, 961.

⁴⁹ Fred Kaplan, *Gore Vidal* (London, 1999), 731.

the cost (currently \$38 billion).” Furthermore, in terms of foreign intervention, “unlike Ronald Reagan and Jerry Brown, I would like to see us withdraw entirely from El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Guatemala.”⁵⁰ While Vidal developed a platform for state issues—he proposed, for example, desalination plants to deal with the problem of drought, and the establishment of a co-ordinated information service to combat unemployment—his main concerns were national in scope. Furthermore, in his proposals to arrest the defense budget and to amend the corporate tax structure he separated himself from what he saw as the one-party two-party system.

Vidal approached the 1982 Primary with the understanding that because democratic government no longer functioned, the only way to change the system would be from the inside. “I’m tired of being in a position where I can express what I think on matters and nothing at all will happen,” he explained. “This is the one final attempt to overcome this frustration—going through a campaign, getting elected, and being in a position where I can do something. The fact that no one does much of anything in the Senate is a matter of choice . . . If I were there only to curb the Pentagon, examine the CIA, and tax corporations or licence them, that would relieve my frustration and out together practice with preaching.”⁵¹ This personal crusade to change the political system from the inside was founded on his call for a Constitutional convention in the three essays ‘State of the Union: 1980,’ ‘The Real Two-Party System,’ and ‘The Second American Revolution.’ “The rights guaranteed by the Founders in the old Constitution should be reinforced; the presidential form of government should be changed for a parliamentary system; the secret agencies should be abolished . . .”⁵² “Ideally, we should go to a parliamentary system,” he stated in an interview for *People Magazine*, “putting the Supreme Court and

⁵⁰ ‘Gore Vidal: the Serious Alternative,’ GVC, ‘1982 Campaign Materials.’

⁵¹ Interview with Gore Vidal, Dave Phinney and Lois Richtand, ‘In the Game of Politics,’ *Bayside Magazine*, April 21-29, 1982, 3.

⁵² ‘State of the Union: 1980,’ *US*, 950.

President back in their cages and giving more power to Congress.”⁵³ Yet Vidal did not, like the Farmer’s Alliance at the end of the nineteenth century, have access to media that were outwith what Lawrence Goodwyn termed the “sundry indoctrinations emanating from the larger culture that was industrial America itself.”⁵⁴ In spite of an ambitious platform, and to a certain extent because of his style of campaigning, Vidal was in conflict with the established press throughout.

The press coverage uniformly quoted from Vidal’s standard speech, a variation on the ‘State of the Union: 1980’ essay, and yet concentrated far more comment on his jokes than on his political analysis. It is astounding to read through the extensive coverage accrued over the three months of the campaign and find very little substantial difference between stories. A characteristic response was that of Randy Shilts in his article ‘Novel Approach to Senate Race.’ Shilts mentioned a few of the issues Vidal raised in the ‘State of the Union’ speech, yet added, “Vidal’s best moments came when he lapsed into a sophisticated political stand-up comedy act, peppered with caustic one-liners.”⁵⁵ Yet as Vidal wrote in 1975, part of his technique was to “[g]et them laughing early. And often. Later the mood will be quite grim out there as I say things not often said in this great land of ours where the price of freedom is eternal discretion.”⁵⁶ This strategy did not seem to work in a political campaign. The journalists reported his jokes far more competently than they reported his political analysis. As Doug Willis observed in one of the more judicious reports, “the one-liners feed the suspicion that Vidal is not a serious candidate; that he is not running to win, but to spotlight his anti-war views.”⁵⁷

⁵³ Anderson, ‘Don’t Worry That Vidal is Running Out of Oxen to Gore.’

⁵⁴ Lawrence Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise* (1976), xi.

⁵⁵ Randy Shilts, ‘Novel Approach to Senate Race,’ *San Francisco Chronicle*, March 17, 1982.

⁵⁶ ‘State of the Union: 1975,’ *US*, 920. (*Esquire*, May 1975.)

⁵⁷ Doug Willis, ‘One-liners distract from the seriousness of Gore Vidal,’ *San Mateo Times*, May 17, 1982.

Kenneth Reich of *The Los Angeles Times* expressed his concern that Vidal's "talks are kind of tangential to a political campaign as such." He added, "[h]e's not talking about what he would do for the economy. It's one thing to theorize, but another to say what he's going to do in the Senate."⁵⁸ This was demonstrably *not* the case, even at this early stage of the campaign, which did not become official until the following month. Aside from his attack on the military budget, one of his main concerns was taxation. "Now that the first Reagan tax bill has been passed, the pattern is pretty clear. The tax burden is almost entirely carried by the middle-income bracket and the relatively poor, if that is not a redundancy. The rich pay little or nothing, the corporations pay little or nothing." He proposed "a flat 10 or 15^{percent} tax," which would "do away with tax shelters, loopholes and all the chicanery and red tape and the taking of deductions."⁵⁹

Such talk, however, was dismissed by journalists as, for example, "lack of economic expertise."⁶⁰ (Ironically, the proposition of an across the board 10^{percent} tax, which was far more simplistic than Vidal's proposition for corporations, was one of the stands Reagan had endorsed from as far back as the 1950s.) Furthermore, the audiences on his lecture tour, Vidal claimed, would give "curious responses when I say I want to tax corporations" because that "sounds like you want to burn the flag."⁶¹ Vidal's plan to tax corporations therefore occasioned no significant analysis from the journalists on the election trail. Yet in an article published on UPI in June 1981 on, the journalist Edward F. Roby had demonstrated that this corporate tax burden Reagan proposed to arrest was in fact a myth. Based on an official report prepared for the Department of Energy, Roby noted that in 1979 the tax paid by the twenty-six largest energy corporations was only 12.4^{percent}. The nominal tax rate was

⁵⁸ Bob Dorn, 'Gore Vidal: Publicus Vitalis at La Costa,' *San Diego Magazine*, February 1982, 160.

⁵⁹ 'State of the Union,' GVC, '1982 Campaign Materials,' 2, 14.

⁶⁰ Real, 'Gore Vidal, Roman Senator,' 11.

⁶¹ Phinney and Richtand, 'In the Game of Politics,' 3.

46%, yet on average the corporate tax proved to be 23.71⁶² Then, as Vidal wrote in *The Los Angeles Times* on 10 January 1982, "Reagan became president in order to eliminate taxes for corporations (where this could not be done outright, he invented the transfer of liabilities, a gorgeous one-time-rip-off where a company could pass on its losses to a company with profits, allowing the profitable company to pay no tax.)"⁶³ It was through a series of concessions introduced under the Reagan administration in 1981 that the corporate tax was in essence abolished.⁶⁴ There was no serious forum to address this in the establishment California press, and Vidal continued to be represented more as entertainment than as a serious candidate.

The general assessment that Vidal was merely a spoiler therefore persisted. The day before the election on 8 June, Ben Stein summarised the prevailing mood in *The Los Angeles Herald Examiner*. "[F]ew would think it an exaggeration to describe the contest as between two clowns," he wrote. "There is cunning, always-on-the-move space captain Jerry Brown and there is bitchy Gore Vidal. (Vidal is my favorite. Everyone in California knows that his candidacy is the private joke of a few wealthy individuals, so his placards say 'The Serious Alternative.')"⁶⁵ To claim Vidal was not serious is to have missed the whole point to his career as a writer and political activist, and yet to Stein, yes meant no and the matter was settled.

For sheer syllogistic analysis, Stein proved to be outdone by Charles McCabe of *The San Francisco Chronicle*. In his two-part report, McCabe started by referring to his "mixed feelings" about Vidal's candidacy. "While all kinds of crazy things happen in California," he wrote, "Vidal may be a little too rich for even our blood."

⁶² Bagdikian, *Media Monopoly*, 61-62.

⁶³ 'He Is a Leader for Our Times, Tom Mix on a Trojan Horse,' *Los Angeles Times*, January 10, 1982.

⁶⁴ Robert Lekachman, 'The Economy,' *What Reagan Is Doing to Us*, eds. Alan Gardner, Colin Greer and Frank Reismann (1982), 196, 204; Fred Ackerman, *Reaganomics* (London, 1982), 50-55. This has to do with an increase in investment tax credits and a decrease in tax-free depreciation allowances.

⁶⁵ Ben Stein, 'Tomorrow we vote—but where are the candidates we can be proud to vote for,' *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner*, June 7, 1982, A 15.

He then picked through some of Vidal's views: recognition of Red China in 1960, an enemy of HUAC, a belief that the decline of the institution of marriage was balanced with the concurrent rise of psychiatry. In the second story he referred to the 1982 campaign, in which he voiced concern that "Vidal is in the race for the enlargement of his already enlarged ego." It is important to first note that journalists could have been led to such a conclusion as a result of Vidal's antagonistic stand. He made it clear that he saw journalists as an instrument of his opposition, and treated them as such. To illustrate, Jim Wood of the *San Francisco Examiner* printed the story that when the problem of the Mediterranean fruit fly was raised, Vidal referred to the front-runner, Jerry Brown, as "Lord of the Flies," and asked the reporter if he understood the reference.

It is, Vidal says, a biblical reference to Satan. Reporters are a little taken back. Is he suggesting that Brown is Satan? one asks. No, Vidal retreats, he's too silly. Vidal jokes that despite this bit of biblical scholarship he is not anticipating the support of the majority.⁶⁶

What is more, considering the anti-intellectual tradition of the United States, Vidal's tone of bored condescension would be guaranteed to create many an enemy. Yet McCabe is supposed to be offering an analysis of the political issues. Instead he resorts to syllogism. "This might mean," he went on from his conclusion that Vidal is interested in his ego alone, "that he could drop out of the race between now and primary time, and leave Jerry to his own devices, about which the voters of California know far too much by now."⁶⁷

As an old school politician, Vidal resisted the technique of modern campaigning. "Vidal presents a problem to a generation of political writers trained in a methodology that says watch the polls, analyze the campaign organizations and

⁶⁶ Jim Wood, 'Vidal counters "glib" impression with serious Senate platform,' *San Francisco Examiner*, March 31, 1982.

⁶⁷ Charles McCabe, 'Gore,' 'Gore (2),' *San Francisco Chronicle*, April 15 and 16, 1982.

what big names show up,” Bob Dorn explained in *San Diego Magazine*.⁶⁸ Furthermore, Dorn suggested, the failure of the campaign to achieve a greater impact was in all probability due to the fact that Vidal would not play by such rules. On June 4, primary-election day, Vidal came second, with 15% of the vote, whereas Jerry Brown triumphed with 51%. The journalistic coverage, epitomised by Charles McCabe, had concluded even before election day itself that Vidal was to blame for losing the race. For Vidal, the campaign served to confirm his understanding of the media and the extent to which it endorsed the corporate interest. While his Populist stand proved to be an effective ideological foundation for his campaign, the very structure of the social and political system resisted it. Vidal was, in effect, a one man show, with no equivalent of the Populist journals supported by the National Reform Press Association, or the 35,000 official lecturers organised by the Farmer’s Alliance. Much like Cyrus Spitama at the end of *Creation*, he proved representative of a world now lost.⁶⁹ He would nevertheless continue as an ancestral voice who countered the practices of a country he believed to be a republic in name but not in fact.

⁶⁸ Dorn, ‘Gore Vidal: Publicus Vitalis at La Costa,’ 160.

⁶⁹ It is interesting to note that the last candidate to run such a campaign was Adlai Stevenson. Stevenson, whom Vidal had supported in the 1952 and 1956 elections, was likewise the smart-talking patrician who was on the people’s side. In his 1952 “let’s talk sense to the American people” presidential campaign, he too fell victim (although less dramatically) to the anti-intellectual field of Cold War politics.

***Duluth* and the political consequences of television**

The election of Ronald Reagan to the presidency of “the electronic village that used to be known as the United States” gave rise to two of Vidal’s most penetrating works: the satirical *Duluth* (1983) and the historical *Lincoln* (1984).¹ *Lincoln* was originally intended to be a television drama. Vidal wrote a three-part script in 1980, “a murder mystery” that covered the years 1861 to 1865.² Yet as he said in an interview conducted in December 1981, Vidal found an essential difference between writing a screenplay, such as the *Lincoln* mini-series, and a novel, such as *Creation*. The former “is done very quickly” and “comes alive as it’s written.” For the latter, the writer “has to think a great deal. He has to know a lot. And he has to relate one thing to another. It’s like city planning.”³ The first draft of the novel *Lincoln* was written between October 20, 1982 and July 17, 1983. In it Vidal transformed his fairly straight-forward character study into a panoramic analysis of how Lincoln recreated the American nation state. He demonstrated that from his use of the daguerreotype and the telegraph to his intimidation of the press, Lincoln inaugurated “our third and most imperial republic.”⁴ Yet to understand the country that elected Reagan, it would be necessary to understand the nature of the electronic village. This is the aim of *Duluth*.

¹ ‘He Is a Leader for Our Times, Tom Mix on a Trojan Horse,’ *LAT*, January 10, 1982.

² ‘LINCOLN project—Outline by Gore Vidal,’ October 22, 1979, GVC, MCHC82-013, Box 1, Folder 21.

³ Gail Steinberg, ‘An interview with . . . Gore Vidal,’ *Writing!*, December 1981, 13.

⁴ ‘State of the Union: 1980,’ *US*, 941. (*Esquire*, August 1980.)

Vidal started to write *Duluth* on August 28, 1981, and completed the first draft on October 2. As a result of his work on the California Democratic Primary it was however not published until April 1983.⁵ (Indeed, it would be reasonable to assume that *Duluth* might have proved material for the opposition. The collection of essays *The Second American Revolution*, published in April 1982, was far more suitable for a manifesto.) *Duluth* is a third person narrative written in “jagged little pieces, all in the present tense, much like the TV format.”⁶ Its 89 short chapters are, the narrator states, “a worm’s eye view” of a city that carves a triangle out of the centre of the United States. From the city of Duluth in northern Minnesota to the Mexican border, “a mere ten miles away,” and “[j]ust across the causeway” to New Orleans, *Duluth* is a microcosm of contemporary America.⁷

The plots are manifold. In the first chapter the socialite Beryl Hoover and her realtor Edna Herridge are buried alive in a snowdrift. They discuss Duluth’s social circle and the identity of the mysterious Dude, who is “numero uno behind the scenes.”⁸ Although by the third chapter both have breathed their last, Edna is reborn into a television soap-opera, ‘Duluth,’ whereas Beryl resurfaces in a Hyatt Regency novel, *Rogue Duke*. It is then left to Beryl’s son Clive to fulfil the dream of linking her business empire with that of The Dude’s. Meanwhile, the chief of police, Captain Eddie, and the Mayor, Mayor Herridge (brother of Edna), battle it out for the latter’s job; Lieutenant Darlene Ecks of the Duluth Police Department, who is prone to strip-searching illegal Mexican aliens, inadvertently creates the Aztec Terrorists Society,

⁵ It is impossible to date anything but the first mss. There are no other recorded dates in the archive.

⁶ Interview with Gore Vidal, Sheila Weller, ‘Vidal on the new visual culture,’ *Self Magazine*, May 1983.

⁷ *Duluth* (1983), 16, 21, 25. These are the farthest geographical points. There are many cities that are mentioned as nearby, such as Tulsa, Oklahoma, and Atlanta, Georgia.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

who vow revenge; the opportunistic Mayor Herridge then dispatches a squad of FBI-trained Darlene look-a-likes to enflame the barrios and discredit Captain Eddie. In the resulting conflagration, the leaders of Duluth are driven to the McKinley Communications Center Tower, and are there imprisoned by the Aztec Terrorists. Lieutenant Ecks is then sent to contact The Dude. He threatens to expose one of the current presidents of the United States for illegal dealings: that president in turn arranges for the release of the hostages, and transportation for the terrorists to a country of their choice.

Only moments before the operation in the barrios begins, Mayor Herridge enters the mysterious pink spaceship which has, from the second chapter, plagued the rulers of Duluth. The aliens inside persuade him that it would be in the city's interest if they opened an amusement park while waiting for the spare parts needed to repair their engine. The Aztec Terrorists have meanwhile returned with their ransom money and plan to buy the barrios. They are double-crossed by Mayor Herridge, who, after clinching a deal with their leader, Pablo, sells the barrios to the aliens. In the meantime, Pablo is hypnotised by Herridge's friend, the former CIA agent, Bill Toomey. Pablo then kills Captain Eddie, who resurfaces in the romantic novel *Rogue Duke*. From the pages of *Rogue Duke*, Clive Hoover's mother Beryl directs him to a concealed letter which reveals that The Dude is Mayor Herridge. Clive, who became The Dude's Silent Partner after the death of Beryl Hoover (who had previously bought out Bellamy Craig II), then forces Herridge out. He chooses the former drug dealer and beloved of Darlene Ecks, Big John, to become Mayor. The Hoover and Dude empires are therein united and the plots are resolved.

Over all of this chaos presides the writer Rosemary Klein Kantor, the author of both the romance novel *Rogue Duke* and the microcosm Duluth (of which the novel *Duluth* is "a worm's eye view"). Klein Kantor is the archetypal popular writer

of the television era. She does not write fiction so much as reassemble it on her word-processor, which is “connected with a memory bank containing ten thousand popular novels.” Through the narrative commentary on her work, Vidal demonstrates the rules of fiction that govern *Duluth*: first there is “the relative fictive law of absolute uniqueness,” which means that “each character in any fiction—as in any life or nonfiction—is absolutely unique;” and second is its corollary, “the *simultaneity effect*,” which means “any character can appear, simultaneously, in as many fictions as the random may require.” Thus although Edna Herridge in *Duluth* and the character actress Joanna Witt (who plays Hilda Ransome in the television soap-opera ‘Duluth’) are one and the same, each character is unique to the narrative in which she appears. “We call this,” the narrator concludes, “*après* post-structuralism.” Through this caricature of literary theory Vidal indicates that television fiction does little more than recycle a limited range of characters. Therefore when *Duluth* is finished, “the whole vivid living (for now) crew will drift off to new assignments.” Yet as with *Duluth*, the author of the “new assignments” will be a Klein Kantor, of whom there are, the narrator comments, “literally and simultaneously [a] legion.” In Vidal’s *Duluth*, the archetype Klein Kantor is enslaved by the “fictive laws” that ensure the chief characteristic of television and popular fiction is, in effect, “plagiarism.”⁹

At the end of the narrative, Klein Kantor reveals her authorial role. To “*prove*” that “our words and deeds” are controlled by “fictive laws,” she erases the city.¹⁰ It is the revolution in domestic computer technology, which had started in the latter half of the 1970s, that enables Klein Kantor to achieve this. The word-processor is, consequently, a metaphor that characterises how television fiction is written. *Duluth* indicates that it did no more than mirror the influence of television. This is integral to Vidal’s understanding that literacy is essential to the maintenance

⁹ Ibid., 12, 15, 16. The author of *Rogue Duke* and the city of Duluth is also, in a different incarnation, the author of the soap-opera ‘Duluth.’

¹⁰ *Duluth*, 212.

of a democratic society. "Reading and thinking are ways out of a mute, dulled acceptance of the official line and the status quo," he stated in a 1983 interview. "People who don't learn to think (and reading is how you do it) miss the chance to be informed, critical citizens and to understand the world they live in, to get a purchase on it." For Vidal, the "pulsing light" of television and the computer screen dulled—and in a sense precluded—the thought process. "[T]he eye watches as the mind dozes," he wrote of television in 1968, "much as our ancestors narcotized themselves with fire."¹¹ In writing *Duluth*, Vidal concluded that in an age when television was at the centre of US society, the democratic experiment foundered because the electorate were no more than consumers of a fictional America. He likewise concluded that the country is sustained by the authors of its popular fictions. The city Rosemary Klein Kantor erases, the narrator comments, is therefore only "one *Duluth*, the fictional one *she* knows, a mere drop in the bucket." Her *Duluth* is, as such, a microcosm *and* a macrocosm. In the final paragraphs the six-foot-tall alien centipede, Tricia, who replaces Klein Kantor at the console of her word processor, consequently "describes the metamorphosis from present-day human *Duluth* to the myriapodal one, simultaneous with the other, yes, but equally immutable and autonomous."¹² In control of the word-processor, it is she who is now author of *Duluth*, the dominant fiction. It was through such control, *Duluth* attests, that American society was enslaved to the principle of conformity over and above that of diversity.

TELEVISION ENTERTAINMENT AS POLITICAL CONTROL

The blurb printed inside on the first edition of *Duluth* is the single sentence "*Duluth* tears the lid off *Dallas*." This is the principal key to the narrative. *Dallas* was first

¹¹ 'The Twenty-Ninth Republican Convention,' *US*, 844. (*NYRB*, September 12, 1968.)

¹² *Duluth*, 212, 213, 214. A further joke is that Klein Kantor is a diluted version of the J.J. Kelly who brought an end to the human race in *Kalki*.

screened in 1979. In a time of economic recession it turned away from the city and toward the open plains of the South. The political significance of this, as Horace Newcomb argued in the essay 'Texas: A Giant State of Mind,' was that while *Dallas* offered the economic promise of the new corporate South, it also, like the Reagan administration, offered "style and power, an understanding of boardroom politics, big money, and smooth deals."¹³ Like *Dallas*, *Duluth* incorporates North and South. Its "nearby" cities—Tulsa, Oklahoma and Atlanta, Georgia—are in the Sunbelt. It is, consequently, a likeness of what Vidal termed "our third and most imperial republic," the federal union created by Abraham Lincoln.¹⁴ In the epilogic chapter of *Lincoln*, Vidal has John Hay state that, as a result of the Civil War, Lincoln "not only put the Union back together again, but he made an entirely new country, and all of it in his own image."¹⁵ The fictional Duluth, a single city which encapsulated the diversity of contemporary America, is representative of what Vidal believed the act of union had achieved. At the beginning of the 1980s he saw that the South, which in *Dallas* represented a new frontier, was not an alternative to, but constrained by, the industrial practices of the North. In *Duluth*, his reinterpretation of *Dallas*, Vidal maintained that a society so founded would undermine the diversity for which the idea of America stood.

Furthermore, in symbolic terms, Vidal's fictional city Duluth is, geographically, the last frontier. Yet whereas Emerson described the frontier as "the appointed remedy for whatever is fantastic or false in our country," this frontier is nothing more than a narcotic to dull reality.¹⁶ A fiction such as *Dallas* could

¹³ Horace Newcomb, 'Texas: A Giant State of Mind,' *Television*, ed. Horace Newcomb (1982), 173. (*Channels*, April-May 1981). Newcomb also writes of a correlation between the presidency of Jimmy Carter and the initial success of *Dallas*. Nevertheless, the interests of the corporate financiers in *Dallas* was more representative of the hard-edged approach of the Reagan administration.

¹⁴ 'State of the Union: 1980,' *US*, 941. (*Esquire*, August 1980.)

¹⁵ *Lincoln* (London, 1984), 656.

¹⁶ Ralph Waldo Emerson, 'The Young American' (1844), *Complete Prose Works* (London, no date given), 397.

therefore represent the style and promise of the federal government, and in so doing offer an alternative which, like the one-party two-party system, did not threaten the current social, political and economic organisation of the country. Accordingly, the subject of *Duluth* is how the frontier of television undermined the idea of the United States as an exceptional state, and how the political process is, as a result, little more than a fiction. *Duluth*, which draws its characters and plots from such fiction, “tears the lid of *Dallas*” because it shows that television is ultimately a form of political control which serves as an opiate for the people.¹⁷

The America Vidal describes in *Duluth* is no more than a reflection of its television fictions. In a 1976 article, *The New York Times* critic John Leonard concluded that

[w]hat the nation *knows* is what is on TV. I submit that television *is* our culture, the only coherence we have going for us, naturally the repository of all our symbols, the attic of old histories and hopes, the hinge on the doors of change.¹⁸

Television, Leonard continued, is the primary socialiser in American society. Its power is consequently immeasurable. For Vidal this proved to be the core of its political threat. “One reason for this surfeit of recreational gadgetry,” he concluded, “is that people don’t want to think.” If people are not taught to think, or to question, they are open to manipulation, which is “just fine with the government, because if people think, they might become discontent and try to change things. This has always been government’s fear, but never before has it had such a weapon: television.” As products of this “weapon,” the characters in *Duluth* are an illustration of how

¹⁷ In this sense *Duluth* demonstrates Vidal’s approach to history, which can at times seem deceptively straight-forward. The idea of diversity, of exceptionalism, is representative of his ideal. While he writes of the conflict between North and South he does not limit himself to any simple dichotomy. Although he is interested in the processes of *exclusion* from history, he is aware, as S.J. Kleinberg wrote, that rewriting “any excluded group back into the narrative of history is a complex exercise.” *Women in American Society, 1820-1920* (Brighton, Sussex, 1990).

¹⁸ John Leonard, ‘And a Picture Tube Shall Lead Them,’ *American Mass Media*, eds. Robert Atwan, Barry Orton, William Vesterman. 380. (*Playboy*, June 1976.)

television sustained a culture founded on conformity.¹⁹ The logic at the heart of television entertainment, Vidal demonstrates, is the political principle of control.

Throughout *Duluth*, Vidal makes it clear how the challenges to cultural stability which originated in the '60s and '70s were contained by television. The characters are therefore coded: each one is representative of an essential component in television fiction. Through Clive Hoover, his relationship with Duluth's social leader Chloris Craig, and his association with her husband, Bellamy Craig II, Vidal provides a picture of ruling class power. Through the conflict between Captain Eddie and Mayor Herridge he demonstrates that the political process is little more than a game, and that the real decisions are made by the likes of Bellamy Craig II and The Dude. Yet it is ultimately through the Duluth Police Department that Vidal shows how television responded to the cultural challenges of the era. As John Leonard argued, the market-driven ; television ^{of the 1970s} could not afford to lose the dissident factions—whether they be children, women, or black—and so they were integrated. “As it dimly perceives our needs as a nation,” he wrote, “television tinkers with itself to accommodate and nurture.”²⁰ The DPD is representative of how, through such accommodation, television returned the nonconformist to the sanctuary of the law. It did not, *Duluth* demonstrates, observe the idea of the exceptional society but, instead, used its rhetoric to represent, and at the same time master, the sources of dissent.

The police officer Darlene Ecks is characteristic of how '70s television fiction responded to the feminist movement. Ecks is drawn from the television series *Police Woman* (1974-1978), which featured Angie Dickinson as Sergeant Pepper Anderson, a “part-sleuth, part-actress” who “conducted vice-squad investigations using such

¹⁹ Weller, ‘Vidal on the new visual culture.’

²⁰ Leonard, ‘And a Picture Tube Shall Lead Them,’ 380-381.

guises as model, gangster's girl, prostitute and rapist bait."²¹ *Police Woman* demonstrated, as Susan J. Douglas wrote in *Where the Girls Are*, the standard media response to the social unrest caused by the feminist movement. It offered the classic formula of "a mix of concessions liberally larded with dire warnings." The rationale behind the show, which featured a strong woman lead exploiting her highly visible sexuality, was, Douglas argued, "an excuse to terrorize" women, and "reinforce the most offensive stereotypes about which kinds of women get raped and why."²² Anderson used her sexuality to lure her bait, and at the same time subjected herself to the possibility of rape. She made it clear that although her sexuality enabled her to succeed in a man's world, to stray from its sanctioned parameters—the home, the family—is to be an obvious target for rape. Thus the nonconformist is warned of the price to be paid for liberty.

Through the character of Darlene Ecks, Vidal caricatures the fictional mainstay of *Police Woman*. Pepper Anderson is the prototype for Ecks' police work, from her undercover work as a stewardess out to snare heroin racketeers in 'Seven-Eleven,' to a gym teacher in the attempted break-up of a drug-ring in 'Smack,' and a go-go dancer in a homicide investigation in 'Blast.'²³ In her first scene, Ecks, "disguised as a virgin and carrying what look to be all her jewels and accessories in a string bag," lures a "would-be rapist," whom she then proceeds to strip-search, unaware that "she has just created the merciless chief of what will soon be known worldwide as the Aztec Terrorists Society."²⁴ When she is then captured by the vengeful Society, and raped in an abandoned warehouse, Ecks lets out a scream which is heard by Lieutenant 'Chico' Jones, who saves her from impending death. Ecks proves the thesis of *Police Woman* that Anderson is, after all, a woman, and

²¹ David Martindale, *Television Detective Shows of the 1970's* (Jefferson, North Carolina, 1991), 389.

²² Susan J. Douglas, *Where the Girls Are* (1994), 211.

²³ Martindale, *Television Detective Shows of the 1970's*, 389, 391.

²⁴ *Duluth*, 20, 24.

therefore had to be rescued “by the male cavalry” from the threats to her person she induced.²⁵ Through her rape and subsequent rescue she is reminded of rules hitherto rejected.

As a satire on television fiction, *Duluth* reproduces the plots through which such characters as Pepper Anderson are returned to the fold. At the start of the narrative, the wayward Darlene Ecks is somewhat protected by the fact that the targets of her relentless strip-search are Mexican immigrants. Her transgressions punish a minority with no real voice in television broadcasting. Thus “Captain Eddie has always been behind Darlene one hundred percent because, like everyone else, he knows that the only way you can get an illegal alien to cross the Rio Grande and go home is to hassle him.” Yet on a routine drug-bust, Ecks transgresses this boundary: she strip-searches the staple crime-drama villain, the black drug-dealer Big John, and watching his erection rise, asks herself, “[c]an this be . . . love?” Vidal satirises the romantic fiction of sexual role by distilling the two figures into “Man” and “Woman.” In time-honoured pornographic style, he reduces them to their requisite genitalia. Then, after the sexual act, the “essentially conservative” Darlene discovers “she is, at last, a woman. Warm and mature. Loving and giving.”²⁶ The nonconformist is, in other words, no more than a sexually immature woman. Her experience with Big John is the start of her *re*-education.

Darlene Ecks is, furthermore, an avid reader of the romance fictions written by Rosemary Klein Kantor. At the time of the drug-bust at the Regency Hyatt Hotel, she is reading the serialisation of the Hyatt Regency novel *Rogue Duke* in the magazine *Redbook*, which, the narrator states, was “recently revived by the enemies of the Equal Rights Amendment.”²⁷ The genre of the romance fiction is a target in

²⁵ Douglas, *Where the Girls Are*, 210.

²⁶ *Duluth*, 37, 40, 51, 52, 58.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 23.

Duluth because, like television, it reinforced heterosexual stereotypes. In such fiction, Janice Radway explained in *Reading the Romance*, the characters are coded. Invariably the heroine starts out “with traits and behaviours usually identified with men.” To a woman they are “symbolic representations of the immature female psyche.” Through the course of the book however, the heroine is tamed by the hero and attains a womanhood “constructed and realized within patriarchal culture.”²⁸ This is, moreover, a reflection of Vidal’s mock-theory, the *simultaneity effect*, which ensures that the characters of popular fiction—on television or in book form—are “always the same yet always different.” In the opening chapters of *Duluth*, Darlene Ecks, who wears jockey shorts “because they make her feel authoritative,” reflects the head-strong, sexually immature heroine at the start of the romance.²⁹ As a reader of romance fiction and a product of television fiction, she will do no more than repeat the behaviour of her prototype. She is therefore destined to meet the dark hero who will tame her wayward side.

Ecks must, however, pay a penalty for discovering her ‘true’ sexuality so late in her so far unnatural life. After allowing Big John escape from the heist she is left to complete her re-education at the hands of Aztec Terrorists Society in a rape she considers, under the circumstances, to be fair revenge, after which they could “[s]hake hands. Be good sports. Let bygones be bygones.”³⁰ Ecks realises the always present subtext of *Police Woman* that when Pepper would so often come close to being raped the audience could fantasise, in the words of Douglas, “about a woman who dared to do a ‘man’s job’ getting her just deserts.”³¹ Pining for the love of Big John and wondering whether it is he or any one of the three Mexican rapists who impregnated her, Ecks is forced to play a line somewhere between limited liberation

²⁸ Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance* 1984 (1987), 120, 123-124.

²⁹ *Duluth*, 15, 23.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 85.

³¹ Douglas, *Where the Girls Are*, 210.

as a police lieutenant and homemaker. The act of penetration steers her away from the perversion of the strip-search and toward sanctioned heterosexual love. Nevertheless, she has to endure her punishment before she can—literally—harvest its fruit. At the same time, Big John, who runs a drug-dealing operation for The Dude, must renounce his blackness and become integrated into white society. Only then, the laws of television and romance fiction state, can each be “fulfilled, totally,” and become “suffused with that warmth which only maturity can bring.”³²

Vidal uses such warnings to demonstrate a link between the control of female sexuality on one hand, and the control of race on the other. The incompetent Lieutenant ‘Chico’ Jones epitomises the cultural message of the ‘70s cop show and the backlash against militant black activism. In the early ‘70s, Hollywood responded to black activism in a series of what came to be known as ‘blaxploitation’ movies. Such films, Karen Ross wrote in *Black and White Media*, “contrasted sharply with the black saint image peddled by [Sidney] Poitier’s various incarnations,” which “appealed more to a white and emerging middle-class black audience.” Poitier’s roles, such as the bright police officer Virgil Tibbs in the 1967 movie *In The Heat of the Night*, were replaced by characters such as the private detective John Shaft. This gave a black audience fictions about “the aggressive black hero who beats the system and ends up with the money *and* the woman.”³³ The television detective shows, on the other hand, marked a backlash against blaxploitation movies. The television series *Shaft* (1973-1974) “tore the soul out of the man,” David Martindale observed, and “turned a tiger into a pussycat.”³⁴ Shrunken to the proportions of integrated television entertainment, the character of Shaft was no longer separate from the larger culture but, instead, part of it.

³² *Duluth*, 206.

³³ Karen Ross, *Black and White Media* (Cambridge, 1996), 18.

³⁴ Martindale, *Television Detective Shows of the 1970’s*, 442.

The role of the black cop in the television drama was accordingly never that of a maverick like Hollywood's John Shaft. He invariably appeared alongside his white buddies in shows such as *The Mod Squad* (1968-1973), which introduced the formula of one black man, one white man, and one blonde woman. 'Chico' Jones is the reactionary face of this fictional black America. "He prefers the word 'colored' to the word 'black'," the narrative states. " 'Chico' is old fashioned," and therefore much more acceptable to the white mainstream television audience, unlike "the brothers who are—now that welfare is being cut back—more than ever into blackness." As well as selling key rings and angel dust on the side, he courts abuse from the willing Darlene Ecks, who would handcuff him to the steering wheel of the squad car and verbally abuse him. In a town with "excellent race relations," as Beryl Hoover is informed on witnessing a lynching, 'Chico' is the acceptable face of integration and a token to ward off any claims of racism directed at the DPD. Both a traditionalist and incompetent, he is no threat to the social and political hierarchy of Duluth sustained by its television fictions. Unlike Darlene Ecks, he does not have to be tamed. He is always prepared to voice Cold War rhetoric—"I'll bet its full Commies in there," he says of the pink spaceship—and in his role as "loyal sidekick" always defers to his chief, Captain Eddie.³⁵

The DPD is run by Captain Eddie Thurow, who is the figurehead of law enforcement in *Duluth*. He is a contender for the post of Mayor and a stickler for authenticity, which he demonstrates in his opening scene by holding the telephone to his ear with his arthritic shoulder—"a painful business," but "since that is the way that the police chief in the new television series 'Duluth' does it, that is the way that he is going to

³⁵ *Duluth*, 6, 118, 2, 30, 28. In the first draft the site of the lynching is "the two golden arches of the life-size, or, in this case, gallows-size logo of a McDonald's fast food dispenser." This was doubtless removed for legal reasons. 'Duluth,' 3, GVC, M91-032, Box 6, Folder 9.

do it.”³⁶ Thurow is characteristic of the social and political hierarchy television endorsed. He calls the shots to which Lieutenants Jones and Ecks respond. Nevertheless, his jurisdiction, like his identity, is dependent on other fictions. He is guaranteed television exposure by the series of fires “secretly set” by the news team of the *Six O’Clock News*. He declares that the city needs “more law and order . . . more police [and] . . . more prisons,” in response to the crime wave attributed to the illegal immigrants. In fact, “Viva Castro” graffiti is penned by the FBI “in order to make it seem as if Castro is behind all the disorder in the barrios when, actually, it is the FBI itself that instigates most of the riots.”³⁷ As head of the police department he is not there to ensure due process for all but that the social and political hierarchy of Duluth is maintained.

In the wake of the mass disturbance in the barrios this role is made clear. Captain Eddie is answerable to Bellamy Craig II who owns, through a series of trusts, the city’s entire media. The knowledge of this control is, of course, a secret, for otherwise Craig argues, the “SEC and FCC and all the other Communists in Washington would say that I had a monopoly.”³⁸ The distinction between the public face of law enforcement and the actual power in Duluth is used by Mayor Herridge to instigate the riot which confines the elite to their Tower. Herridge, who “wants to be reelected over—if necessary—the dead bodies of the entire DPD,” unleashes a task force of Darlene look-a-likes to enrage the population of the barrios and discredit Captain Eddie. As Mayor he is in the position to exercise such power, safe in the knowledge that no one would be surprised by the destabilising activities of illegal immigrants with no political rights. Similarly, the power exercised by Bellamy Craig II is to direct Captain Eddie “and his special squad whose sole task it is to guard”

³⁶ *Duluth*, 4, 6.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 6, 8, 20.

³⁸ The SEC, the Securities and Exchange Commission, is a government agency created in 1934 to protect the public against malpractice in securities and financial markets. The FCC, the Federal Communications Commission, regulates the broadcast of communication.

their homes on Garfield Heights.³⁹ Television protects the two powerhouses. Yet in tearing the lid off of Rosemary Klein Kantor's *Duluth*, Vidal demonstrates how its fictions endorse the symbolic hierarchy of social and political power, and protect the real one from scrutiny.

AN HISTORICAL RESPONSE TO AN AHISTORICAL ERA

Throughout *Duluth* Vidal is concerned with the creation of a satiric form that would best characterise the symbolic hierarchy of power in contemporary America. To achieve this end he first devised a theory through which the action could be deciphered. The characters are ruled by "the fictive law of absolute uniqueness," which "[l]ike most absolute laws," is relative. Thus when a character "dies or drops out of a narrative, he will then—promptly—reappear in a new narrative, as there are just so many characters—and plots—available at any given time." Corollary to this "is the *simultaneity effect*," which "means that any character can appear, simultaneously, in as many fictions as the random may require." He or she is, therefore, "always the same yet always different."⁴⁰ This parody of literary theory is essential to Vidal's continuing argument with the theorists—writers and practitioners alike—over the form and the purpose of the novel in the television age. In his assault on the house of fiction from television drama to the serious novel, Vidal concluded that it is unable to represent the power hierarchy because it is apolitical and ahistorical. *Duluth* is an attempt to redress this.

³⁹ *Duluth*, 121, 62, 116.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 15.

The Italian writer Italo Calvino observed that in *Duluth* “Vidal’s bêtes noires are the writers and critics” who “experiment with or theorize new forms of the novel.” He then asks if there is a conservative Vidal.

It would be difficult admitting to that, since one cannot speak of the revival of the novel’s form in the last fifteen years without turning back to what may be his most famous novel, *Myra Breckinridge*. That satirical and grotesque burlesque, made up of a collage of the language and myths of the mass-culture, inaugurated a new phase in the way to present our era, which is comparable to pop art, but much more aggressive and with an explosion of expressionistic comedy.⁴¹

Vidal, as Calvino recognised, is not opposed to literary experimentation. His approach is not that of a conservative but of a dissident. In *Myra Breckinridge*, he attempted to redefine the relationship between art and popular culture. His representation of that culture is, moreover, borne from an argument with the critics of the French New Novel over the historical and political significance of the novel. Throughout the 1967 essay ‘French Letters: Theories of the New Novel,’ Vidal wrestled with the problems of literary representation raised by the critics Alain Robbe-Grillet and Nathalie Sarraute. Although he counters the majority of their ideas, he reads them with notable seriousness. ‘French Letters’ and *Myra Breckinridge* are, as a result, a practitioner’s corrective to the theory. To further understand how *Duluth* is an attack on the ahistorical practices of fiction in the television era it is therefore essential to first return to these arguments.

In *Duluth*, Vidal is concerned with the question of literary experimentation, the raison d’être of the French New Novel, and the extent to which it engaged with the political issues of the post-modern era. The New Novel, a movement inaugurated in 1938 by Nathalie Sarraute’s *Tropismes*, is concerned with the creation of new forms through which the world could be represented. It is not interested in character. In the

⁴¹ Italo Calvino, ‘Imagining Vidal,’ *Writer Against the Grain*, ed. Jay Parini (London, 1992), 35.

words of Alain Robbe-Grillet, “the novel of characters belongs entirely to the past; it describes a period: and that which is marked by the apogee of the individual.” The New Novelist, he continued, should instead attempt to transcend the “universe of ‘signification,’ ” and “construct a world both more solid and more immediate.” His understanding is that objects could then prevail over “whatever explanatory theory that may try to enclose them in a system of references.”⁴² In his criticism of this work, Vidal concluded that if fiction did not engage with the “universe of ‘signification,’ ” it would prove ahistorical and therefore incapable of investigating its times.

As an exercise in form, *Myra Breckinridge* is a literary assessment, if not an attack on, these ideas. It is presented as the diary of a character whose identity had been formed by an era of cinema when “romantic individualism . . . reached the apogee of its glory.”⁴³ It is, consequently, a novel of character that questions the way in which cultural signifiers determine individual identity. “The novel being dead,” Myra begins the second chapter, “there is no point to writing made-up stories.”

Look at the French who will not and the Americans who cannot. Look at me who ought not, if only because I exist entirely outside of the usual human experience . . . outside and yet wholly relevant for I am the New Woman whose astonishing history is a poignant amalgam of vulgar dreams and knife sharp realities.⁴⁴

The fictional Myra is at once the New Woman *and* the New Novel. Her diary is therefore an attempt to provide the reader “with an exact, literal sense of what it is like, from moment to moment, to be me.” The enactment of her metaphysical journey to “*our* interior” is a critical response to the New Novel. She wrestles with the problem of representation in the first chapters within terms set forth by Robbe-Grillet. “Nothing is like anything else,” she states. “Things are entirely themselves

⁴² Alain Robbe-Grillet, *For A New Novel*, trans. Richard Howard (1965), 21.

⁴³ Leo Rosten, *Hollywood* (1941), 16.

⁴⁴ *MB*, 4.

and do not need interpretation, only a respect for their precise integrity.”⁴⁵ Yet what Vidal endeavours to make clear throughout is that representation is impossible outwith the “universe of ‘signification’.” The satire is dependent on a definitive historical awareness.

As envisioned by its theorists, Vidal argued in ‘French Letters,’ the New Novel would be ahistorical. Yet as Robbe-Grillet envisioned it, the New Novel would forge

new forms capable of expressing (or of creating) new relationships between man and the world, to all those who have determined to invent the novel, in other words, to invent man. Such writers know that the systematic repetition of forms of the past is not only absurd and futile, but that it can even become harmful: blinding us to our real situation in the world today, it keeps us, ultimately, from constructing the world and man of tomorrow.

Nonetheless, Vidal countered, the novel cannot be free from metaphor and at the same time provide a commentary on “our real situation in the world today.” One point to the allusive structure of *Myra Breckinridge* and the dependence on the language of Hollywood myth is to ascertain why it would be impossible to function outwith the cultural signifiers that Robbe-Grillet would abandon. “Perhaps the most naïve aspect of Robbe-Grillet’s theory of fiction,” Vidal continued, “is his assumption that words can ever describe with absolute precision anything.”

At no point does he acknowledge that words are simply fiat for real things; by their nature, words are imprecise and layered with meanings—the signs of things, not the things themselves. Therefore, even if Robbe-Grillet’s goal of achieving a total reality for the world of things was desirable, it would not be possible to do it with language . . . Certainly if he means to reinvent man, then he will want to find a way of defining man through human (yes, psychological) relations as well as through a catalogue of things observed and gestures coolly noted.

To write, Vidal concluded, is to “speculate on the nature of things.”⁴⁶ The writer cannot define a reality beyond words, and so “the subjective will prevail just as it

⁴⁵ Ibid., 6, 8.

⁴⁶ ‘French Letters,’ *US*, 103, 106. (*Encounter*, December 1967.)

does in the traditional novel.” The conclusion reached in *Myra Breckinridge* is that to describe reality is nothing less than to describe the sign-system through which a given society conceives of itself. In *Duluth* Vidal would bring this argument to fruition.

The American interest in French theory which troubled Vidal throughout the 1970s proves to be the one of the principal keys to *Duluth*. He argued that in its raid on French theoreticians, the academic establishment retreated from social and political realities into an ivory tower of theoretical abstraction. “Envious of the half-erased theorems—the prestigious *signs*—of the physicists,” Vidal concluded, “English teachers now compete by chalking up theorems of their own, words having failed them yet again.”⁴⁷ In the introduction to multi-author volume *The Theory of the Novel* (1974), which Vidal reviewed in ‘The Hacks of Academe,’ John Halperin wrote that “[t]he modern view emphasizes the structure of the work and the symbiosis of its composite elements rather than the fiction itself as representative or nonrepresentative of moral or mimetic ‘reality.’ ”⁴⁸ In other words, it is criticism of the world created within the parameters of the novel rather than in its relation to any external reality. “Professor Halperin,” Vidal concluded of the introduction, “is not very interested in novels,” which proved to be mere “teaching-aids” read as theoretical puzzles to be solved by their immersion into the esoteric language of theory. The result of this interest in the novel as autonomous, Vidal believed, was increasingly ahistorical.

The shadow that loomed over this critical exercise, Vidal observed, was the “laboriously read” figure of Roland Barthes. It is important to therefore note, he

⁴⁷ ‘American Plastic: The Matter of Fiction,’ *US*, 124. (*NYRB*, July 15, 1974.)

⁴⁸ John Halperin, ‘A Critical Introduction,’ *The Theory of the Novel* (1974), 18. Vidal’s quotation is also from this page.

continued, the fundamental difference between the French and the Anglo-American mind. "One might put the case that without a French education there is no way of comprehending, say, Roland Barthes . . . One can only take a piece here, a piece there, relate it to the tradition that one knows, and hope for the best." Furthermore, Vidal argued, there is a characteristic antipathy between the French and the American approach to ideas:

as we have always heard (sometimes from the French themselves), the French mind is addicted to the postulating of elaborate systems in order to explain everything, while the Anglo-American mind tends to shy away from unified-field theories. We chart our courses from point to point; they sight from the stars.⁴⁹

Abraham Lincoln explained the American political tradition of pragmatism in such terms during the Civil War: "The pilots on our Western rivers steer from point to point as they call it—setting the course of the boat no farther than they can see." That, he concluded "is all I propose to myself."⁵⁰ Vidal believed that for the American theorist, charting from point to point, Barthes could not represent a theory, but a series of ideas—some understood, some not—to be seized in the creation of literary theory. The overall effect would therefore be undermined by an inability to assess the greater perspective of such ideas.

In *Duluth*, it is the theory of the sign, and its appropriation by contemporary criticism *and* fiction, in which Vidal is interested. The essay 'American Plastic' (1974) is an analysis of how the theory of the sign influenced the literature at the heart of the current academic debate. After his reading of John Barth and William Gass, neither of whom impressed him, he approached the work of Thomas Pynchon and his use of French theory. Although Pynchon's fiction does not approach the zero degree writing (that which is free from metaphor) Barthes prescribed, it is

⁴⁹ 'American Plastic,' *US*, 125, 122.

⁵⁰ Cited in David Donald, *Lincoln Reconsidered* 1956 (1961), 136.

nonetheless an exercise in the language of the sign. The quest that sustains the three novels *V.* (1963), *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), and *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973) is a search for the meaning of a given sign. Vidal however does not here fully address Pynchon's use of this theory. He is more interested in the influence of zero degree writing and the fact that the quest is not a new but "a classic form of narrative." It is in *Duluth* that he more firmly engages with the theoretical interest in the sign.⁵¹

Duluth is dominated by its signs. The city itself is overshadowed by the McKinley Communications Center Tower and the words that ring from its summit, "*Duluth! Love it or loathe it, you can never leave it or lose it.*" "Just what does that sign mean?" Beryl Hoover asks Edna Herridge in the first chapter.⁵² Each of the characters are, furthermore, coded and represent a particular type in popular fiction. The figure of Pynchon is introduced in relation to one of the many cryptic signs, the pink spaceship. Captain Eddie discovers that by moving the thumbtack which signified the spaceship on the DPD map of Duluth he is able to move the craft itself, and that

according to Pynchon's lesser corollary to the law of gravity, whenever a spaceship (macro) is represented by an object (micro) on an *exact* chart of where gravity insists it rests when not under propulsion, then *macro* will move on its plane exactly as *micro* moves on its representational plane.

The aliens inside likewise understand this principle, and add that "[i]t seldom works outside of a university literary lab, where we may well be."⁵³ This is a parody of *Gravity's Rainbow*, which is set in the Second World War, and observes a quest for the symbolic meaning of the V-2 rocket. It follows an argument concerning the relationship between what the rocket is in "the Cartesian x and y of the laboratory" to what it is in fact. The rocket, and the bomb it carries, is for Pynchon a sign. It is

⁵¹ 'American Plastic,' 122, 141.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 3, 5.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 67, 152.

representative, the scientist Herr Rathenthau explains, “of structures favoring death.”⁵⁴ The joke in *Duluth* is that, in the laboratory, the rocket is representative of an idea that in reality (which is defined by such ideas) then comes to pass. It is in Pynchon’s literary laboratory that the physical rocket and the idea of the rocket are consolidated. The pink spaceship, which is ultimately representative of whatever otherness the characters of *Duluth* care to ascribe to it, is a theoretical formula historicised.

The key Pynchon work addressed in *Duluth* is, nevertheless, neither *V.* nor *Gravity’s Rainbow* but *The Crying of Lot 49*, which is likewise concerned with the operation of modern communications. It observes the quest of Oedipa Maas to organise the estate of her deceased ex-lover, Pierce Inverarity, “into pulsing stelliferous Meaning.” In her attempt to decipher this sign-system, Maas is frustrated by the principle of entropy, which in this case is a metaphor, “a figure of speech” connecting “the world of thermodynamics to the world of information flow.”⁵⁵ According to the metaphor, the more information that is at work the more it is prey to the law that everything is losing energy. An overload of information would therefore result in the dissolution of meaning. Maas’ quest falls victim to this and no final answer is forthcoming. This dead end is concurrent with the idea put forward by both Robbe-Grillet and Barthes that the novel should disavow the authority of a central signifier. According to Frank Kermode (in an essay printed in *The Theory of the Novel*) the ideal Barthesian text would be “a network of significations, of *signifiants* lacking transcendental *signifiés*.”⁵⁶ The detective novel, Kermode argued, was therefore ideal for it was more interested in the quest to organise a series of codes than in character. To then deny a central signifier would be an ideal conclusion

⁵⁴ Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity’s Rainbow* 1973 (London, 1995), 400, 167.

⁵⁵ Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* 1966 (London 1996), 14, 73.

⁵⁶ Frank Kermode, ‘Novel and Narrative,’ *The Theory of the Novel*, 169. In ‘The Hacks of Academe’ Vidal paid serious attention to both this and to Leslie Fiedler’s ‘The Death and Rebirth of the Novel.’

for the New Novel. This structure is reflected in *The Crying of Lot 49*. Throughout Pynchon is writing a detective story in which the clues master the detective. The reader is denied an organising signifier and therefore an ultimate meaning.

The ruling sign in *Duluth*, the McKinley Communications Center Tower, is a satire on this reading of the sign. It is Vidal's translation of Barthesian theory into the arena of American literature. It is the literal realisation of his understanding that an American reader of Barthes can "only take a piece here, a piece there, relate it to the tradition that one knows, and hope for the best."⁵⁷ A prototypical sign in the Barthesian canon is the Eiffel Tower. Barthes described it as a "pure—virtually empty—sign:" it plays the part "of the pure signifier, i.e., of a form in which men unceasingly put *meaning* (which they extract at will from their knowledge, their dreams, their history)." In itself therefore, the tower means nothing, but as a signifier that overlooks the entire city, it has, through the process of signification, become "the universal symbol of Paris." The identity of Paris, Barthes argued, is therefore *invested* in the symbolic status of the tower.⁵⁸ Likewise, the identity of *Duluth* is invested in the McKinley Tower.

In *Duluth* Vidal toys with the relationship between the sign itself and the investment of the sign with meaning. The Communications Tower is a mirror of Barthes' Eiffel Tower and a practical translation of French theory into an American context. The Tower is the source of information flow in *Duluth*. It is the symbolic spring from which the identity of the city flows. It has, moreover, a monopoly, for since the introduction of KDLM-TV as "*the* ABC affiliate and flagship for the Great Lakes and Tijuana area" "nobody has read much of anything." The sign itself means nothing. It is nevertheless a code to be solved. It is therefore significant that it is only

⁵⁷ 'American Plastic,' *US*, 125.

⁵⁸ Roland Barthes, 'The Eiffel Tower,' *A Roland Barthes Reader*, ed. Susan Sontag 1982 (London, 1993), 237, 238.

the print journalist, Wayne Alexander, who is sure “it is some sort of code, to be broken in time.”⁵⁹ The other characters are “narcotized by TV” and do not question it.⁶⁰ Thus whereas *The Crying of Lot 49*, in the French theoretical tradition, denies the meaning of the central signifier, the characters in *Duluth* are unaware that the Tower *is* the signifier and therefore cannot ask the questions that would unmask the mystery of the sign.

Furthermore, like the ideal work Frank Kermode described, *Duluth* is a detective novel. As with *The Crying of Lot 49*, Vidal’s detectives are mastered by the facts. Nevertheless, the representatives of law and order in *Duluth* do not aspire to uncover the main signifier, but to maintain the fictions that issue from it. The Duluth Police Department is the institutional signifier of law and order, yet as products of the *prime* signifier, the Tower, the detectives are coded in the same way that everything else is. The quest for the meaning of the sign is, therefore, the work not of a character within *Duluth* but the work of the reader. The first chapters therefore introduce a series of questions which determine what is to happen throughout. The first is the sign “*Duluth! Love it or loathe it you can never leave it or lose it,*” that is written above the Tower itself. The second is the statement,

If, as it has been so often said, every society gets the Duluth that it deserves, the United States in the last but one decade of the Twentieth Century has come up with a knockout.⁶¹

It is in these questions, and the series of codes introduced in the first chapters, that the reader is to find the answer to *Duluth*. It is furthermore Beryl Hoover’s question “what does that sign mean?” which anchors the proliferation of stories at work throughout the narrative. What it means is that the Tower, the source of the fictions from which the cast of *Duluth* spring, defines the social and political character of

⁵⁹ *Duluth*, 7, 34.

⁶⁰ Weller. ‘Vidal on the new visual culture.’

⁶¹ *Duluth*, 3.

Cold War America. *Duluth* can neither be left nor lost because it is a microcosm of a society that is forever the product of its dominant fictions. Thus whereas Pynchon is interested in the ultimate erasure of meaning, Vidal is interested in the restoration of meaning to signs. His aim is to counter an ahistorical interest in theory and decipher how American society has been rendered apolitical by its own fictions.

THE END OF HISTORY

Throughout *Duluth* Vidal observes Roland Barthes' conclusion that a "mode of writing is an act of historical solidarity."⁶² The two dimensional narrative which characterises *Duluth* mirrors that of its television fictions. Its historical critique is to be found in the replication of the broadcasts that issue from the organising signifier, the McKinley Communications Center Tower. Furthermore, another clue (or code) to the political significance of the mode of writing is to be found in work of Rosemary Klein Kantor. The narrator notes that the interaction between *Rogue Duke* and *Duluth* which nearly occurs when, as a consequence of the *simultaneity effect*, Beryl Marchioness of Skye (née Hoover) witnesses the coitus between Big John and Darlene Ecks, is "the ultimate goal of every creator, the Kozinski Communal Effect."⁶³ This is one of the manifold codes that link *Duluth* to the representation of television in the house of contemporary fiction. Vidal uses it to connect the world of *Duluth* with a reading of the current trends in political thinking, or non-thinking, induced by the television culture.

The progenitor of the "Kozinski Communal Effect" is the writer Jerzy Kosinski, who throughout the 1970s wrote and lectured on the effects of television.

⁶² Barthes, 'from *Writing Degree Zero*,' *Barthes Reader*, 35

⁶³ *Duluth*, 53.

His third novel *Being There* (1971) told the story of Chance, a gardener who is forced to leave his home for the first time in his life when his rich benefactor dies. In a series of contrived adventures he is brought to the home of a dying industrial magnate, where he meets the president of the United States and, in metaphors of gardening, converses about an economy of which he has no understanding. Soon he is on a television chat show billed as an advisor to the president. He is complimented on his “naturalistic approach to politics and economics.”⁶⁴ For Chance, all interaction is determined by the medium of television. He is, Kosinski later explained, “at the mercy of the tube. He cannot imagine himself functioning in anything but particular situations offered him by TV programs.”⁶⁵ This is the essence of Vidal’s parodic “Kozinski Communal Effect:”

Everything on TV was tangled and mixed and yet smoothed out: night and day, big and small, tough and brittle, soft and rough, hot and cold, far and near . . . By changing channels he could change himself. He could go through phases, as garden plants went through phases, but he could change as rapidly as he wished by twisting the dial backward and forward. In some cases he could spread out into the screen without stopping, just as the TV people spread out into the screen . . . Like sunlight and fresh air and mild rain, the world from outside entered Chance, and Chance, like a TV image, floated into the world, buoyed up by a force he did not see and could not name.⁶⁶

Like the characters in *Duluth*, Chance’s identity is not his own. It is determined by the content of television. The joke is that the “Kozinski Communal Effect” would mark the preponderance of the *simultaneity effect*. The result would be the unqualified rule of the popular fictions satirised in *Duluth* and a society where people do not think but consume.

This joke has moreover a greater political dimension. The narrator notes that the “Effect” was “perfected in the early years of the Central Intelligence Agency at Langley.”⁶⁷ The CIA is an agent of social control. Television is a primary weapon of

⁶⁴ Jerzy Kosinski, *Being There* 1971 (1972), 76.

⁶⁵ David Sohn interviews Jerzy Kosinski, ‘A Nation of Videots,’ *Television*, ed. Newcomb, 353.

⁶⁶ Kosinski, *Being There*, 5.

⁶⁷ *Duluth*, 53.

social control. It is this understanding that makes the reference to Kosinski apposite in the first year of the Reagan administration. The reasons that Chance proved a success on the political stage paralleled the reasons for Reagan's success. Chance knows nothing of politics and yet talks in metaphors from which the audience could draw their own conclusions. "The economy is supposed to be like a garden: you know, things grow and things wilt," one of the characters excitedly reports. She then praises Chance as "a cross between Ted Kennedy and Cary Grant. He's not one of those phony idealists, or IBM-ized technocrats."⁶⁸ This is, of course, in the anti-intellectual tradition that enabled Reagan to climb to the symbolic, if not actual, top of the greasy pole. It is also indicative of the power exercised by celebrity.

The success of Reagan, as Michael Paul Rogin observed, was predicated on the fact that as a celebrity "he represents valued qualities rather than acting on them."⁶⁹ He is, as Garry Wills wrote, "the great American synecdoche, not only a part of our past but a large part of our multiple pasts."⁷⁰ As a politician, Reagan did not need to *mean* anything. His presidency was a rhetorical sideshow conceived in Hollywood and dedicated to the proposition that "an era of national renewal" could be achieved through restricting "the intervention and intrusion in our lives that result from unnecessary and excessive growth of government."⁷¹ Not tied to meaning but to myth, he relieved a dishonoured government office from the constraints of fact. Like the protagonist of Kosinski's novel, he talked not in terms of policy but in metaphors. As Paul D. Erickson wrote, "[h]e reduces questions about economic planning, constitutional interpretation, national defense and all other matters to their most basic emotional level and presents them as parts of a struggle between good and

⁶⁸ Kosinski, *Being There*, 58.

⁶⁹ Michael Paul Rogin, Ronald Reagan, *the Movie and Other Episodes in Political Demonology* (Berkeley, 1987), 8.

⁷⁰ Garry Wills, *Reagan's America* (1987), 1.

⁷¹ Ronald Reagan, 'Inaugural Address,' 20 January 1981, *Speaking My Mind* (1990), 63.

evil.”⁷² In other words, he talked in the binary language of Cold War television which reigned from the Western through to the cop show. In *Duluth* this is the *only* language.

For Vidal, the presidency of Reagan was illustrative of the system under which the United States laboured. “The real rulers have to have a front,” he said in March 1981. “They tried Nixon, but he kept shooting himself in the foot. Then Carter didn’t work out. The choice of Reagan is fascinating because it shows just how desperate the ruling class is. Nobody reads cue-cards better than Reagan. They’re writing the scripts, he’s playing the role—but Ronnie is no more president than I am.”⁷³ To talk of the Reagan administration does not therefore mean, as Noam Chomsky observed, that one is “referring to the figure set up to front” for the “rich folk.” The Reagan era therefore represented, he continued, “a significant advance in capitalist democracy. For eight years the US government functioned virtually without a chief executive.”⁷⁴ In other words, a B-movie actor had been elected to the ultimate political B-movie, the American presidency. Yet when Reagan was elected to the governorship of California in 1966, Jack Warner said, “You’ve got it all wrong. Jimmy Stewart for governor. Ronald Reagan for best friend.”⁷⁵ In 1980 however the office of ^{the presidency} was a B-movie lead role. The federal government was merely a cosmetic front for the real government, the manifold boardrooms of America. The spirit of Hollywood, of fiction over fact, had finally engulfed Washington. The country, as Vidal said in 1989 on the publication of *Hollywood*, “got a double thing in Reagan: they got a great speech-reader, and they got a memorial which meant that

⁷² Paul D. Erickson, *Reagan Speaks* (1985), 72.

⁷³ Christopher Anderson, ‘Don’t Worry That Vidal is Running Out of Oxen to Gore: He Says He’s Running for the U.S. Senate,’ *People Magazine*, March 30, 1981, 52.

⁷⁴ Noam Chomsky, *Deterring Democracy* 1991 (London, 1992), 73, 74.

⁷⁵ Kitty Kelley, *Nancy Reagan* (1991), 167.

anymore more than 40 years old could say . . . Here was the old America come back.”⁷⁶

The black comedy inherent in the presidency of Reagan is of fundamental importance to *Duluth*. His cameo is an illustration of Vidal’s understanding that the federal government is a television entertainment separate from the real power exercised by “the very important people” who watch over an inflamed Duluth from the McKinley Communications Center Tower. Accordingly, Reagan’s appearance is integral to the comedy. As Vidal wrote of the 1980 film *Airplane!* “I kept hoping that its three auteurs (bright show-biz kids) would open up the farce. Include President Carter and his dread family; show how each would respond to the near-disaster. Add Reagan, Cronkite, the Polish Pope. But the auteurs stuck to the only thing that show-biz people ever know about—other movies and television commercials.”⁷⁷ In *Duluth* Vidal adds Reagan to his melting pot of television fictions and has him respond to the crisis brought on by the conflagration in the barrios.

“Of the many presidents,” the beleaguered social leaders of Duluth are addressed by “the very old one that they use on the television to read cue cards through shiny contact lenses.”⁷⁸ The joke is that, as Vidal observed, “Ronnie is no more president than I am.”⁷⁹ It is also comment on a practice characteristic of the administration. Reagan was protected through the act of delegation from the fact that he knew precious little concerning policy. Information was released to the press

⁷⁶ Jonathon Coe, ‘Don’t Look for Athens,’ *Guardian*, November 2, 1989.

⁷⁷ ‘Thomas Love Peacock: The Novel of Ideas,’ *US*, 161. The dialogue in *Duluth* is at times very much like that of the 1980 film *Airplane!*, of which Vidal said, “I have seen it five times and found it to be a kind of James Joyce’s *Finnegan’s Wake*. Each time I see it I discover new levels of meaning.” Digby Diehl, ‘Gore Vidal sounds off on, well, a whole lot,’ *Los Angeles Herald Examiner*, January 27, 1982.

⁷⁸ *Duluth*, 122.

⁷⁹ Anderson, ‘Don’t Worry That Vidal is Running Out of Oxen to Gore.’

through his PR team, and Reagan delivered the national television address. For the press conference the idea was to assign department heads to report the relevant news. As the director of communications, David Gergen, explained, “you only have one four-star general in battle, but you’ve got a lot of lieutenants who can give blood. And if the going is getting hot and heavy, it is far better to have your lieutenants take the wounds than your general. Because once that happens to your president, it is very difficult to recover from it.” In other words, to avoid conceal Reagan’s ignorance, and to “set the agenda” for the news, the president was kept safely isolated.⁸⁰

The Reagan presidency proved to be the apotheosis of the television era. As the journalist Hedrick Smith wrote, “[i]n the presidential TV serial, each episode replaces the last one; most are almost instantly forgotten. Each sequence of events is treated like a minidrama, with beginning, middle, and end.” It was, moreover, beyond fact. An illustration of the power exercised by the television image, Smith wrote, was Reagan’s 1983 two-month tour on the subject of education, “an issue Reagan largely ignored.” It was a success for it changed “the public’s perception and attitudes toward Reagan’s policy position, without Reagan changing his policy.”⁸¹ It was a soap-opera presidency in which problems were raised and then neutralised. No matter that most of his television time was “Rose Garden appearances that have nothing to do with policy,” to the electorate, as Vidal maintained, “[h]ere was the old America come back.”⁸²

Vidal’s take on this mythical old America is dramatised in Reagan’s second television address to the people of *Duluth*. Mayor Herridge, troubled by the presence of the spaceship, and the fact that it is not full of Commies but real space aliens, turns to the federal government, because “from the beginning this has been a federal

⁸⁰ Mark Hertsgaard, *On Bended Knee* (1988), 28, 32, 33.

⁸¹ Hedrick Smith, *The Power Game* 1988 (London, 1989), 549, 571.

⁸² Hertsgaard, *On Bended Knee*, 51; Coe, ‘Don’t Look for Athens.’

problem, not a municipal one.” The answer he receives is a broadcast from the television president which outlines the precepts of a new federalism:

As all you folks know, we’re turning everything back to the states ‘n’ the cities ‘n’ the small towns like . . . uh, like that one I grew up in. Friendly sort of place it was. Oh, we were rich, sure. But we didn’t know it. Which is what made America great. ‘Cause we’re taking the government off your backs. This means that from now on each town can go out ‘n’ print its own money ‘n’ have its own army, navy, customs—even space program, if it wants. Like they got out there in Duluth. The sky’s the limit for the little guy.⁸³

For Mayor Herridge, this is typical Washington subterfuge. For Vidal, it signalled the end of federal responsibility rather than the devolution he called for in his ‘State of the Union: 1980’ address. “The Reagan administration got elected by promising to get the government off our backs,” he stated in his standard campaign speech. “Actually what they meant was to get government off the backs of the rich.”⁸⁴ The new approach to federal responsibility was a demonstration of this.

The new federalism of the Reagan administration was predicated on the return to what was, in effect, a pre-Civil War understanding of state’s rights. Conservative apologists wrote that “Reagan, like many Republican politicians, is a traditionalist on federalism issues.”⁸⁵ In other words, this spelled an end to the government intervention inaugurated by the New Deal. “If anything,” the economic historian John D. Lees wrote,

it argued for a return to what may be considered the original intentions of the federal system, or the first principles of federalism. This meant a return to a view of the states as at least equal partners of the national government with respect to programmes, and as being on balance more efficient and more flexible in organising and financing programmes.⁸⁶

⁸³ *Duluth*, 172. ^{Reagan Administration's} The political formulation New Federalism was not coined until after this section of *Duluth* was written.

⁸⁴ ‘State of the Union,’ GVC, ‘Campaign Materials,’ M91-032, Box 4.

⁸⁵ Richard P. Nathan, ‘Institutional Change Under Reagan,’ *Perspectives on the Reagan Years*, ed. John Palmer (Washington, D.C., 1986), 136.

⁸⁶ John D. Lees and Michael Turner, *Reagan’s First Four Years. A New Beginning?* (Manchester, 1988), 183.

This pronounced end to the liberal experiment proved to be little more than Right-wing subterfuge. Handing the control of federal programmes to the states, with the professed aim to reduce bureaucratic red-tape, meant the further dismantling of the welfare state. The economist Frank Ackerman wrote that beyond the rhetoric

groups formerly protected by law are now pitted against each other in the struggle for shares of the smaller pie. In the harsher political climate of the 1980s, minorities and disadvantaged groups will find it much harder to win their battles over again. How much of the new education block grants will be spent on bilingual and special needs programs, and how much on computer courses that employers request to prepare the fastest students for their careers in Tomorrowland?⁸⁷

This is the crux of the argument. The new federalism Reagan proposed meant the increased government subsidy of corporate America. A decrease in spending on government programmes was equalled by an increase spending on defence. "The result," as Vidal wrote of the Cold War state in 1963, "is a unique society in which we have free enterprise for the poor and socialism for the rich."⁸⁸ As Reagan announced in April 1981, the aim of the new economic programme was "controlling government spending, reducing the tax burden," and "building a national defense second to none."⁸⁹ Or as Ackerman read this policy, "Reagan's budget cuts are a key to solving inflation the conservative way, by driving down wages, the working conditions, and the bargaining strength of those at the bottom of the working class—those most dependent on government benefits for survival."⁹⁰ In any case, the rhetoric Reagan voiced did not in truth represent the actual practices of the administration.

In *Duluth*, Vidal represented this policy as the epitome of the new, wholly mythic, America. After outlining the plan to hand power back to the states, Vidal has the president announce,

⁸⁷ Fred Ackerman, *Reaganomics* (1982), 92.

⁸⁸ 'Edmund Wilson, Tax Dodger,' *US*, 794. (*Book Week*, November 3, 1963.)

⁸⁹ Ronald Reagan, 'Speech in support of Economic Recovery Legislation,' April 28, 1981.

⁹⁰ Ackerman, *Reaganomics*, 91.

and by the way, I can now reveal to you that Disney has made us a very attractive offer for the whole city of Washington, D.C. Fact, even as I speak, we're in negotiations to sell it. Just think! Another Disney World right here on the Merrimac—or whatever that river over there is.⁹¹

The politics Reagan brought to Washington, D.C. replicated the Disney treatment of literature. As the narrator of E. L. Doctorow's *The Book Of Daniel* observes, "what is being offered does not suggest the resonance of the original work," but "a sentimental compression."⁹² In the changing political climate of the 1960s, Richard Schickel argued in his classic study *The Disney Version*, it was left to Disney to provide family entertainment. "And that meant the confused middle classes expected him not merely to cater to their values but also to articulate them as well." In the words of New York schoolmaster Donald Barr (quoted by Schickel), "Disney's world is not a child's world at all." Instead it is "an oldster's world, for an oldster is a human relaxing into his past."⁹³ As the president, Reagan is relaxing into his past: the Horatio Alger/Edgar Rice Burroughs world of his childhood reading, and the counterespionage adventures of his B-movie days. His presidency was a performance based on this material. The Disney treatment of the federal government is as such a trenchant observation on the politics of the 1980s. Vidal's conclusion is that, under Reagan, Washington, D.C. was ripe for sale to the Disney corporation. No longer was it a seat of government from which the country was ruled. It was an amusement park for career politicians who represented little else than the corporations regnant in their home states.

CODA: THE MEANING OF THE MCKINLEY COMMUNICATIONS CENTER TOWER

⁹¹ *Duluth*, 173.

⁹² E.L. Doctorow, *The Book of Daniel*, 1972 (London, 1982), 294-295.

⁹³ Richard Schickel, *The Disney Version*, 1968 (London, 1986), 340, 354.

In a mirror of Shakespearean tragedy, the third act of *Duluth*, the conflagration in the barrios, is the climax. In the fourth act, which documents the fall, the Aztec Terrorists return to Duluth with the millions gained by holding Duluth's social elite for ransom. It is an election year, and Mayor Herridge is under threat from the candidacy of Captain Eddie, so he decides to sell the entire barrios to Pablo in return for the Mexican vote. At the same time he conceives a contingency plan. Bill Toomey, a graduate of the CIA course of "auto-suggestion and political assassination," trains Pablo to shoot. He then dictates to him a diary that describes his plan to kill Herridge, "the symbol of white Anglo oppression," and his subsequent decision to kill Captain Eddie instead so that Jodie Foster will love him.

Needless to say, the world believes that he is what Bill Toomey has set him up to be. The world knows that anyone who keeps both a diary *and* a photograph of Jodie Foster is a lone, crazed killer, eager to kill a television president or mayor or even a chief of police on television.⁹⁴

In this last coded event, Vidal is satirising the history of assassination attempts from Kennedy to Reagan. On March 30, 1981, the day of Hollywood's Academy Awards, John W. Hinckley shot Reagan. According to his diary, Hinckley had imitated the life of Travis Bickle, a character played by Robert DeNiro in the 1976 film *Taxi Driver*. In *Taxi Driver* DeNiro won the love of the child prostitute Jodie Foster after killing her pimp, which he does only after his failure to assassinate a political candidate. Yet for Vidal, the recent history of political assassination in the United States, and the place of the diary in that history, is far more sinister. The events that follow the shooting of Captain Eddie in *Duluth* accordingly unveil the power hierarchy that rules through the signifier, the McKinley Communications Center Tower.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 165, 198.

"In the electronic era," Vidal wrote in August 1981, "letter-writing has declined while diaries are kept only by those ill-educated, crazed, lone killers who feel obliged to report, in clinical detail, just how crazed and solitary they are as they prepare to assassinate political leaders."⁹⁵ A more comprehensive statement on the role of the diary in political assassination is the essay 'The Art and Arts of E. Howard Hunt,' in which he describes some of Hunt's ~~novels~~ and the extent to which his work for the CIA informed them. From this analysis Vidal progresses to the diary of Arthur Bremer, who on May 15, 1972 shot the presidential contender George Wallace. "It is not unnatural to suspect the White House burglars of having a hand in the shooting," Vidal noted. (Hunt and G. Gordon Liddy turned up at Bremer's house to search for evidence, for instance, the day Wallace was shot.) "But suspicion is not evidence and there is no evidence that H.H. was involved." What there is, however, is the question of the diary. Vidal read it as the work of a professional, full of literary references and the sort of detail that would appeal to the best-seller author alone. There is, moreover, the obligatory sex scene of popular fiction, which

is nicely done and the author writes correctly and lucidly until, suddenly, a block occurs and he can't spell anything right—as if the author suddenly remembers that he is meant to be illiterate.

The diary, Vidal concludes, is nothing more than a mirror of the Lee Harvey Oswald story. Bremer failed to kill Nixon as Oswald failed to kill his first target, General Walker: thus Pablo's diary in *Duluth*. For Vidal this raised a question about the political character of the American empire. "Is it possible," he asks, "that during the dark night of our empire's defeat in Cuba and Asia the American story shifted from cheerful familiar farce to Jacobean tragedy—to murder, chaos?"⁹⁶

⁹⁵ 'Theodore Roosevelt: An American Sissy,' *US*, 736. (*NYRB*, August 13, 1981.)

⁹⁶ 'The Art and Arts of E. Howard Hunt,' *US*, 881, 883. (*NYRB*, December 13, 1976.) The geography of *Duluth* is, moreover, is a memorial to the four assassinated presidents: James Garfield (Garfield Heights), William McKinley (McKinley Tower), Abraham Lincoln (the cemetery Lincoln Groves), and John F. Kennedy (Kennedy Avenue, which leads to the barrios).

The complexities of the final acts are, nevertheless, more in the tradition of comedy than tragedy. The joke is that it is down to interpretation whether *Duluth* is in fact a comedy or a tragedy. Furthermore, in using this structure, Vidal is deliberately mocking the model of tragedy discussed by Meir Sternberg in his contribution to *The Theory of the Novel*, Freytag's Pyramid. Vidal's point is that the answer is not to be found in structural (or indeed post-structural) analysis, and that, in political terms, the fall is nothing but a change of cast. At least for the aliens on the spaceship "the changeover proves to be no big deal." "We can always do business with city hall no matter what peg they put in the round office," the alien Tricia states. The changeover is however the time for Rosemary Klein Kantor to reveal the meaning of her Duluth.

In the penultimate chapter, Klein Kantor addresses the Penpersons Club of Duluth. She reveals the principle under which they labour. "We are simply formulations of words," she declares. "We go on, and we go on. From narrative to narrative, whether in serial form or in those abstract verbal constructions so admired by the French and boola-boola Yale!" The people of Duluth are nothing more than her creation, which she proves on her word-processor with "a hunt and peck, as it were, of my digit." She then erases the city of Duluth, "which exists only because I dream it does." In the end, and beyond the confines of theory, as Vidal wrote in conclusion to 'American Plastic,' "there are only words and their arrangements." What is therefore significant about Pynchon's work, he argued, is not the "proofs" of contemporary science, but the uses to which this is put to shed light on current thinking. After all, "[p]roofs are always being disproven by other proofs."⁹⁷ For Vidal, what Pynchon and the theorists demonstrate is the extent to which social and political meaning in post-modern America proved far harder to define than in the more innocent days before the assassination of Kennedy and the fall of the empire.

⁹⁷ 'American Plastic,' *US*, 144.

Yet to retreat into the confusion, to render a theory to deflect this ontological chaos, or to mystify the meaning of the sign system on which the culture is founded, is of fundamental threat to the identity of that culture. If meaning is to self-destruct at the end of a work, the political threat is colossal. In an era when the president is nothing but a cue-card reader voicing the idea of a mythic America, the individual is threatened with dissolution. The danger is that the law on which *Duluth* is founded is a political reality for the nation itself.

In the end *Duluth* is not therefore the autonomous artefact that theorists from Robbe-Grillet to Frank Kermode called for. As the narrator points out, Klein Kantor can only take this so far by erasing the Duluth “*she* knows,” which is “a mere drop in the bucket.” *Duluth* nevertheless “is as it was—and is—and always will be, with a minor change or two as the tense goes from present to past to future.” This is not merely due to its sustenance theory (or, rather, anti-theory.) It is because *Duluth* is also a *macrocosm* of America. In the shift of tense from present to past to future it perpetually renews itself. Darlene thus repeats to Big John the words emblazoned atop the McKinley Tower as they are caught in this shift. “ ‘I always wondered what that meant.’ . . . ‘It means us, among other things,’ says Darlene. ‘It is what it is—forever.’ ”⁹⁸ *Duluth* therefore is as it always has been. This is the riddle represented by the McKinley Communications Center Tower.

The meaning of the Tower is in the geographical triangle that *Duluth* carves out of the centre of America. At its farthest points it spans from the city of Duluth in northern Minnesota down to the Mexican border and across to New Orleans. This triangle reinterprets a cardinal sign in the history of exceptionalism: the Great Seal. The reverse of the Seal depicts a pyramid. At the zenith is the all-seeing eye of

⁹⁸ *Duluth*, 212, 213.

Divine Providence. At the base is the motto *Novus ordo seclorum*, which declares a new order of the ages. *Duluth* reinterprets the Great Seal for the 1980s. The all-seeing eye is replaced by the McKinley Communications Center Tower. The motto is supplanted with the words “*Love it or loathe it, you can never leave it or lose it.*” This proclaims the new order of the ages: television. Furthermore, the sign is the heir to the twenty-fifth president William McKinley, the first to preside over an empire that stretched beyond America’s continental shores. The Tower is, as such, the ultimate sign of the capitalist conspiracy: the characters in *Duluth* know no other alternative and are therefore enslaved to it. *Duluth* can therefore be neither left nor lost because it is representative of a nation which from its conception in 1776 expanded further and further outward. This progression, Vidal concludes in *Duluth*, was inevitable.

It is space, the *final* frontier, which proves the undoing for this overreaching empire. The masters and mastered of *Duluth* are in the penultimate chapter replaced by “the unique macrocosm of insect life” that lies in the city’s swamps: “Secretly egged on by the bankrupt centipedes from outer space, the bugs have taken over Duluth through a mere shift of tense, replacing those temporary interlopers, the human race.” Rosemary Klein Kantor is then replaced by Tricia, the leader of the alien centipedes. As the repository of human fictions however Duluth is perpetual. Yet, “mandibles clacking” on the keyboard of Klein Kantor’s word processor, Tricia creates an insect dominated Duluth, “totally unlike *Duluth* or even ‘Duluth.’ ” She renders fact the belief of the Duluth swamp cockroaches “that their gods will one day reappear and destroy the human race with some sort of radiation—or erasure lever—to which cockroaches are immune and then the Golden Age of the Bug will begin!” The joke is on the literary theorists: in the end meaning cannot be lost unless the universe of signification is itself destroyed. It is thus that Tricia, with the aid of her erasure lever—a literary nuclear device?—replaces Duluth with a myriapodal one. It

is only after this shift in tense that she can tap into her keyboard that “human day Duluth has come to its predestined articulated and paginated end. Yes. *Duluth!* Loved. Loathed. Left. Lost.”⁹⁹

In this, the most accomplished of his satires, Vidal concludes that under the rule of television there was no prospect of the restoration of an exceptional United States, and that the republic, which existed only as fiction, had departed. The narrative demonstrates that the potential cultural diversity of the nation was denied by television, and enslaved to a social and political consumerism which served the interests of the economic elite. *Duluth* characterises the nature of Cold War America, “the electronic village that used to be known as the United States,” over which the former B-movie actor Ronald Reagan symbolically presided.¹⁰⁰ It ultimately epitomises Vidal’s understanding of why television represented the greatest threat to the realisation of exceptionalism throughout the Cold War era.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 214, 185-186, 214.

¹⁰⁰ ‘He Is a Leader for Our Times, Tom Mix on a Trojan Horse,’ *LAT*, January 10, 1982.

The United States in Systemic Decline, 1984-1998

In the writing he undertook throughout the Reagan administration, Gore Vidal provided a comprehensive reading of the American nation state. In the historical novels *Lincoln* (1984), *Empire* (1987), and *Hollywood* (1990), he traced its progress from the Civil War to the 1920s.¹ In his essays and the satirical *Live From Golgotha* (1992) he described how the empire this era produced came to an end. The end, Vidal wrote in the 1986 essay 'The Day the American Empire Ran Out of Gas,' occurred in 1985 when the United States became a debtor nation. "Like most modern empires," he concluded, "ours rested not so much on military prowess as on economic primacy."² In the 1988 essay 'The National Security State,' Vidal argued that this was an inevitable consequence of its post-World War II design, and the implementation of National Security Council document 68 in 1950. Vidal understood NSC 68, declassified in 1975, to have inaugurated "the strict governmental control of our economy and the gradual erosion of our civil liberties."³ The archetypal pendulum, the periodic swing from Left to Right, he wrote in 1992, was lost "in 1950 when our original Constitution was secretly replaced with the apparatus of that national security state, which still wastes most of our money on war-related matters. Hence deteriorating schools and so on." He concluded that "what is wrong now is not cyclic but systemic."⁴ The political organisation of the

¹ Although *1876* (1976) is chronologically between *Lincoln* and *Empire* it is of course separate from how Vidal conceived of the historical project in the 1980s.

² 'The Day the American Empire Ran Out of Gas,' *US*, 1007. (*Nation*, January 11, 1986.)

³ 'The National Security State,' *US*, 1023. (*Nation*, June 4, 1988).

⁴ 'Monotheism and its Discontents,' *US*, 1052. (*Nation*, July 13, 1992.) This conclusion is designed to return full circle to 'The Golden Age,' which deals not with Vidal's fiction, but with his essay writing throughout this era.

United States, Vidal maintained, defied any resolution to its social and economic decline. In spite of the geopolitical rhetoric of the post-Cold War era, he understood that the government would continue the practices which had sustained that conflict for over forty years.

THE NATION STATE FROM *LINCOLN* TO *HOLLYWOOD*

Following his defeat in the 1982 Democratic Senatorial Primary in California, and the publication of *Duluth* (1983), Vidal dedicated himself to the historical novels *Lincoln*, *Empire*, and *Hollywood*. In *Lincoln*, Vidal describes how a centralised federal state was created from the Civil War; in *Empire* he demonstrates how that state inaugurated the imperial course of American history; and in *Hollywood* he establishes how, following the First World War, the country came to be ruled through the twin capitals of Washington and Hollywood. Like the satirical *Duluth*, these works responded to the ahistorical course of the Reagan era. As Jay Parini noted, although the link between Washington and Hollywood had long been of interest to Vidal, the Reagan presidency took this a step further by forging “the two worlds into fantastic juncture.”⁵ In these three works Vidal concluded that the theme which runs like a thread through his writing, the use of the media to legitimate political objectives, defined “our third and most imperial republic.”⁶

The importance of the media to the realisation of political ends is one of the dominant motifs in *Lincoln*, *Empire* and *Hollywood*.⁷ Throughout *Lincoln* Vidal

⁵ Jay Parini, ‘Gore Vidal: The Writer and His Critics,’ *Writer Against the Grain*, ed. Jay Parini (London, 1992), 26.

⁶ ‘The State of the Union: 1980,’ *US*, 941. (*Esquire*, August 1980.)

⁷ There is, of course, far more to these complex works than I have drawn out here. My aim is to briefly demonstrate how Vidal’s ideas developed throughout the 1980s, and how this is related to his vision of an empire in systemic decline. I have therefore introduced no real argument with Vidal’s historical interpretation.

places great emphasis on the importance of the media to the political career of Abraham Lincoln and to his conduct of the Civil War. He is interested in how Lincoln redefined and recreated the nation state through a calculated use of the newspaper, the telegraph and the photograph. "He was a master of guiding public opinion either directly through a set speech to a living audience, or, indirectly, through an uncanny sense of how to use the press to his own ends," Vidal has Lincoln's secretary, John Hay, recall. The myth of Honest Abe the Rail Splitter, manufactured for the 1860 Republican Convention, meant Lincoln could, David Donald later wrote, be represented "as the embodiment of the self-made man." Nevertheless, "[r]ather than a simple backwoodsman, he was a prominent and successful attorney representing the most powerful interests in emerging corporate America."⁸ It is Vidal's objective to demonstrate how this image, aided by technological advancements in the media, became the one by which Lincoln was known and understood. "Thanks to the telegraph and the modernization of the daguerrotype," he has William Seward, the Secretary of State, consider, "Lincoln's managers had been unable to impress an indelible image on the country's consciousness." Even the shrewd Seward "had difficulty separating the practical if evasive and timorous politician from the national icon that Lincoln and his friends had so carefully constructed before and during the convention at Chicago."⁹ It was through such control, Vidal concludes, that Lincoln was able to define both the aim of the war and the nation state itself.

In *Patriotic Gore*, Edmund Wilson wrote that "the molding by Lincoln of American opinion was a matter of style and imagination as well as of moral authority, of cogent argument, and obstinate will."¹⁰ Vidal makes it clear that this combination was the key to Lincoln's political success. The unification of style and

⁸ David Herbert Donald, *Lincoln* (1995), 245. Donald was the historical advisor on Vidal's *Lincoln*.

⁹ *Lincoln*, 232.

¹⁰ Edmund Wilson, *Patriotic Gore* 1962 (1977), 123.

authority Wilson observed underlines Vidal's re-creation of the Gettysburg Address. In starting with the idea of a nation "conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal," "[i]t was as if," Vidal has Seward deliberate, "the President was now trying to justify to the nation and to history . . . what he had done."¹¹ Lincoln's definition of the war, as Wilson noted, in turn became the country's.¹² In returning to the "great ideals" of freedom and liberty, Garry Wills wrote in *Lincoln at Gettysburg*, Lincoln derived "a new, transcendental significance from this bloody episode. His aim was to " 'win' the whole Civil War in ideological terms as well as military ones."¹³ This confirmed Vidal's understanding that the victor is he who can control the dominant fiction.

Nevertheless, another definition of the war, as John Hay instructs Charlie Schuyler, the fictional narrator of *Burr* and *1876*, is that "the Southern states had every Constitutional right to go out of the Union. But Lincoln said, no. Lincoln said, this Union can never be broken."¹⁴ Hay, who as Owen Dudley Edwards pointed out has "a little more in common with the fictional Charlie Schuyler than with the real John Hay," is often the agent of Vidal's reason.¹⁵ Hay's reasoning, moreover, reflects a Southern interpretation of Northern history. In *Screening History*, Vidal recalled that he

was shocked to find my grandfather had no high opinion of Lincoln's prose. When I recited the Gettysburg Address to him, he took me *back* of the music to the sense of the speech, which appalled him. Lincoln was celebrating the men that he had caused to die in a war of his own making, to preserve a union of states that did not choose, a number of them, to be united.¹⁶

¹¹ *Lincoln*, 490.

¹² Wilson, *Patriotic Gore*, 122-124.

¹³ Garry Wills, *Lincoln at Gettysburg* (1992), 37.

¹⁴ *Lincoln*, 656.

¹⁵ Owen Dudley Edwards, 'On an Earlier President,' *Encounter*, January 1985, 34.

¹⁶ *Screening History* (London, 1992), 69.

It was from a Southern standpoint that Vidal countered Lincoln's interpretation of the war. He understood the suspension of *habeas corpus* and the First Amendment to mean "there was nothing that the Administration could *not* do, under its wartime powers," and in turn recognised Lincoln as a dictator.¹⁷ Furthermore, in the 1981 essay 'The Second American Revolution,' Vidal argued that Lincoln loosened the bars of the presidential cage through his emphasis on the oath to "preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States." The notion of "inherent executive power and executive privilege" was thus sired, presidential power was raised over and above that of Congress, and the third republic inaugurated.¹⁸ It was the mythology Lincoln had created, Vidal concluded, that enabled him to achieve this. His "political genius," Vidal has Seward realise, was that he "had made himself absolute dictator without ever having let anyone suspect he was anything more than a joking, timid backwoods lawyer."¹⁹

On its publication in 1984, *Lincoln* provided an historical background to the somewhat ahistorical Reagan era. Although the professional actor Reagan was no dictator in embryo, he was, Vidal wrote in 1981, the "kindly voice . . . whose less than kindly mind is elsewhere in the boardrooms of the Republic."²⁰ For Vidal, the Reagan presidency instituted a corporate dictatorship in a way that no president had before, and in *Lincoln* he establishes a genealogy for the association between government and the private sector. It was the Civil War, Vidal demonstrates, that inaugurated this alliance. Faced with the problem of financing the war, he has Salmon P. Chase ask how the government is to raise the money. The banking magnate Jay Cooke responds, "[b]orrow it, like any other business would." Although Chase is not sure "that the financing of the government by these . . . wolves . . . was

¹⁷ *Lincoln*, 234.

¹⁸ 'The Second American Revolution,' *US*, 971. (*NYRB*, February 5, 1981.)

¹⁹ *Lincoln*, 459.

²⁰ 'Pink Triangle and Yellow Star,' *US*, 611. (*Nation*, November 14, 1981.)

in the best interest of the people,” he is forced into it by necessity. To the bankers, who “were after high profits on short term loans,” war itself meant profit.²¹ This was of pressing concern in the early years of the Reagan administration, which had occasioned the revival of Cold War rhetoric, and a concurrent increase in the official military budget from \$197 billion in 1980 to \$296 billion in 1985.²² From the time of the Civil War, Vidal wrote in ‘State of the Union: 1980,’ the “republic’s master was the Bank.” By 1945 the republic was “the world’s master,” and in order to “keep profits high” the Bank “decided to keep the country on a permanent wartime footing.”²³ To understand what the Reagan administration was actually doing, Vidal would seem to be suggesting in *Lincoln*, one had to return to the era of the Civil War.

As an historical lesson *Lincoln* diffused the rhetorical spin of the Reagan administration. In his first inaugural address, Reagan stated “we have been tempted to believe that society has become too complex to be managed by self-rule, that government by an elite group is superior to government for, by, and of the people.” His solution, the proposed new federalism, would therefore restore the balance “between the powers granted to the Federal Government and those reserved to the States or to the people.”²⁴ First, Vidal demonstrates in *Lincoln*, there is no such thing as rule for, by, and of the people: this rhetoric was used to justify a war which limited the capacity for democracy and enriched the industrial class. Second, the devolution Reagan called for signalled no more than an end to federal responsibility, as Vidal argued in his 1982 election campaign. “The Reagan administration got elected by promising to get the government off our backs,” he observed. “Actually what they meant was to get government off the backs of the rich.”²⁵ The centralised nation state

²¹ *Lincoln*, 122, 180.

²² Fred Halliday, *The Making of the Second Cold War* (1986), 235.

²³ ‘State of the Union: 1980,’ *US*, 942. For a more extensive reading of this stand see chapter nine.

²⁴ Ronald Reagan, ‘First Inaugural Address,’ January 20, 1981.

²⁵ ‘State of the Union,’ GVC, ‘Campaign Materials,’ M91-032, Box 4. The question of new federalism is dealt with more comprehensively in the preceding two chapters.

forged throughout four years of Civil War, Vidal argued, was indissociable from the industrial class. From the concentration of federal authority, the power of the country's banks, and the expansion of the railroad, which Vidal has Lincoln state, "joins the whole union into one," the nation was reborn.²⁶ In this work Vidal explained the historical precedents for the Reagan era, and concluded that from the Civil War on, empire was unavoidable.

In *Empire* there is a parallel between the post-Vietnam 1980s and the post-Civil War 1890s which reinforces the understanding that Vidal considered the United States to be in systemic decline. There is in Vidal's re-creation of the Civil War in *Lincoln* a certain correlation with the war in Vietnam. Like Vietnam, the conflict was understood at the start to be a limited war prosecuted against a weaker opponent. The fight, the *New York Times* wrote in April 1861, would be won within thirty days; the *Chicago Tribune*, and Vidal's Salmon P. Chase, predicted the duration of "a few months."²⁷ Furthermore, Vidal depicts the April 12 attack on Fort Sumter, the catalyst for war, as an event made possible by Lincoln's manoeuvrings. As Vidal has Montgomery Blair, the Postmaster General, observe, if Lincoln provisioned Fort Sumter, "the rebels will open fire and then you will have the right to restore the Union by force."²⁸ The August 1964 clash between American and North Vietnamese forces in the Tonkin Gulf served an identical purpose. The alleged attacks (which the 1968 investigations of Senator J. Fulbright, for one, concluded to be a fraud) were provoked by American covert operations and yet resulted in a resolution that gave Lyndon Johnson the power to wage war under executive order.²⁹ Of greater

²⁶ *Lincoln*, 382.

²⁷ Donald, *Lincoln*, 294; *Lincoln*, 123.

²⁸ *Lincoln*, 123, 98.

²⁹ Stephen Ambrose, *Rise to Globalism* (London, 1971), 310. For a reading of the Tonkin Gulf incident as an exercise in news management see Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent* 1988 (London, 1994), 206-210.

consequence is Vidal's understanding that while the Civil War recreated the federal union it also recreated the idea of America. The effect of the war in Vietnam on the idea of America, as Vidal argued in *Myron* and *Kalki*, heralded yet a further retreat into political fiction. It was through the same process, he demonstrated in the essay 'The Day the American Empire Ran Out of Gas,' and in the novel *Empire*, that the American empire began.

The creation of empire, Vidal wrote in 'The Day the American Empire Ran Out of Gas,' was "carefully thought out" in the 1890s by four men: Alfred Mahan, a former navy captain, whose *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History* (1890) demanded a strong Navy; the "historian-geopolitician" Brooks Adams; the "amateur historian and professional politician" Theodore Roosevelt; and the Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, "who kept in line a Congress that had a tendency to forget our holy mission—our manifest destiny . . ."³⁰ Brooks Adams proposed that economic supremacy was contingent on the control of the Asian market. In the 1890s, as the Spanish empire faltered, the chance to assume such control was conceivable. A rebellion against Spanish rule in Cuba, which had got underway in 1895, was the catalyst for war. Spain also controlled the Phillipines, and this conflict would therefore offer a chance to sieze the islands and implement Adams' vision. Roosevelt, who as a result of much conniving was then Under Secretary of the Navy, prepared for war. When the U.S.S. *Maine* sank in Havana Harbor on February 15, 1898, he was ready. On February 25, when Secretary John D. Long was unwell, Roosevelt issued a chain of orders which prepared the Navy "in a state of readiness," his biographer Edmund Morris wrote, "it had not known since the Civil War." As a result of "ten months of strategic planning," Roosevelt had set the stage for war.³¹

³⁰ 'The Day the American Empire Ran Out of Gas,' *US*, 1009.

³¹ Edmund Morris, *The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt* 1979 (1980), 602, 603.

Yet there was, as Vidal demonstrates in *Empire*, one more necessary factor: the fiction engendered by the newspaper magnate William Randolph Hearst.

Throughout *Empire* Vidal demonstrates that to sustain the idea of the American republic, and to continue the corporate domination of the economy, fiction was a prerequisite. The war had to therefore appear as if it were a defence of freedom and the suitable response to an aggressive act. In his newspaper *The New York Journal*, Hearst did not, like Roosevelt, need to wait for the findings of the Court of Inquiry. On February 17, 1898, he accused Spain of destroying the *Maine*, and on March 11 he made the unfounded declaration that the Inquiry found the ship to have been blown up by a Spanish mine. Hearst too was interested in empire, and had from the start of the rebellion in 1895 supported the Cuban insurgents. "The Cuban conflict," his biographer W.A. Swanberg wrote, "gave him the simultaneous opportunity to support what he considered a noble cause and to advance his own interests."³² His own interest was the increased circulation of the *Journal*. Hearst therein claimed authorship of the conflict, for as Vidal has him instruct Theodore Roosevelt, it was "all of it fiction to begin with" until "I saw to it that the war would be a real one at the end."³³ In *Empire*, the narrative of which begins the day after the war ended, Vidal is not so much concerned with who was responsible for the war but how it appeared in the public domain.

For Vidal's Hearst, this is decisive. He is not concerned with Roosevelt's work behind the scenes but the publicity he received after he resigned as Under Secretary of the Navy to command his band of volunteers, the Rough Riders, who won a victory at San Juan. "Theodore Roosevelt may have won a small battle," the narrative contends of , "but everyone conceded that Hearst had started and won a

³² W.A. Swanberg, *Citizen Hearst* 1961 (1971), 128.

³³ *Empire* (1987), 483.

small war. Without Hearst's relentlessly specious attacks on the Spain the American government would never have gone to war." As Del Hay instructs the fictional Caroline Sanford, "[i]t's the way things are made to look that matters now."³⁴ Hearst saw the war as his own because he understood, as Swanberg wrote, that without his "flair for publicity and agitation . . . there would have been no war."³⁵ The point to Hearst's claim was that he, more than the Washington politicians, "had made war not only inevitable but desirable."³⁶ Yet what Vidal demonstrates throughout *Empire* is that the reasons for war were far more complex. At the back of Hearst's propaganda is the fact that he exploits a political tension already in existence. If Hearst made war "desirable" it was because he fuelled this tension. Nevertheless, for the war to have been fought the ground work of Mahan, Adams, Roosevelt and Lodge was essential. It is the *power* Hearst represents that is decisive. In his confrontation with Roosevelt in the final chapter, he states "I go on and on, describing the world we live in, which becomes what I say it is." This, Vidal demonstrates in *Empire*, is the power granted to he who controls the fiction. Nevertheless, he is careful to show the rules of engagement as they affect Hearst and Roosevelt from the end of the war to the end of the narrative in 1906. This undermines the grand claims of both.

To wield power, Vidal demonstrates, one has to serve the interests of the corporate state. Hearst's schemes in the years after the Spanish-American war suffer somewhat for they do not fulfil this criteria. In an attempt to overshadow Roosevelt's political rise as a hero immediately after the 1898 war, Hearst launches a plan to free the French political prisoner, Captain Alfred Dreyfus. Yet whereas the war with Spain was the result of ideas working in tandem, Hearst's plan to make Roosevelt old news, and to consolidate an understanding of the war as *his* victory, is not. The Dreyfus affair is resolved by the French government, which is beyond his control,

³⁴ Ibid., 49, 13.

³⁵ Swanberg, *Hearst*, 172.

³⁶ *Empire*, 54.

and there is no support for his gung-ho plan to physically remove Dreyfus from the jail on Devil's Island. Furthermore, although he is elected to the House of Representatives, Hearst's attempt to secure the Democratic nomination for president in 1904 is undone. Hearst believes this is because, Vidal has him state, he is "resented and feared by the rich" who "run the country."³⁷ Yet although the political power of Hearst's media is contained in *Empire*, Vidal describes an indissoluble marriage between the two fledgling empires, and a possibility for the media to affect history through a deliberate control of image. The realisation of this end is the subject of *Hollywood*.

In *Hollywood* Vidal investigates the developing power of the media through the relationship between the motion picture industry and the federal government from 1917 to 1923. His original intention was for this to have been part of *Empire*.³⁸ In a July 1984 interview he stated that his next historical novel would span the years 1898 to 1919.³⁹ In writing about the scandals of the 1921-1923 administration of Warren Harding, Vidal makes a further link with the Reagan administration, which had from 1986 been embroiled in the Iran-Contra scandals. Yet although there are parallels, Vidal, as Owen Dudley Edwards observed, "has made a strong case for the despised Harding." Edwards moreover refutes a possible reading of *Hollywood* as a parable on the Reagan era, and reaches the far more notable conclusion that "after reading this book it is much easier to understand what historical process made Reagan's America possible."⁴⁰ In writing about the association between the government and Hollywood throughout, and in the era following, the First World

³⁷ Ibid., 484.

³⁸ The first draft of *Empire*, dated January 6, 1985 to July 27, 1986, ends with the confrontation between Hearst and Roosevelt, as it does in the published edition. The first draft of *Hollywood* is dated January 2, 1988 to January 14, 1989.

³⁹ Curt Supplee, 'Gore Vidal, Acerbic Apostate,' *International Herald Tribune*, July 27, 1984.

⁴⁰ Owen Dudley Edwards, 'Ahead of Consensus,' *Glasgow Herald*, November 4, 1989.

War, Vidal demonstrates that the American empire has from the start been rendered legitimate by abstract ideas given form on the cinema screen. The idea of the United States screened by Hollywood cinema, he argues, is inseparable from government propaganda.

The inherent capacity of the motion picture to be used as propaganda is registered by William Randolph Hearst in the first pages of *Hollywood*. Hearst describes the Hollywood machine as “the only truly international thing there is,” and concludes that it is powerful because “to watch a movie you don’t need to know another language the way you have to when you read a paper because it’s all there.”⁴¹ Vidal uses Hearst at the start of the narrative to suggest how the creation of public opinion started to shift from the printed page to the projected screen, and his insight links the two media machines in *Empire* and *Hollywood*. Moreover, Hearst’s definition of motion picture potential confirms it as the natural heir to the Hearstian school of journalism. Nevertheless, unlike the turn-of-the-century yellow journalism, Hearst does not exercise great control over the fledgling Hollywood. The control of such propaganda, Vidal demonstrates throughout *Hollywood*, had by 1917 been arrested by the federal government.

It is the conditions of war, Vidal argues, which enable the government to control Hollywood and in so doing to define the idea of America at this critical juncture. War-time measures introduced a censorship that obstructed Hearst’s freedom to write history as he pleased. The passage of the Espionage Act, which threatened a maximum twenty-year jail sentence for voicing opposition to the war effort, meant that his “bee was stilled.”⁴² Throughout *Hollywood* Vidal is more concerned with the wider implications of this control than the reasons for war. His

⁴¹ *Hollywood* (London, 1989), 6.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 128.

real and invented characters—from Hearst to Blaise Sanford and James Burden Day—accept that the Zimmerman telegram, the probable catalyst for the American entry into the war, as in all probability a fake. Neither does he address the issue of the *Lusitania*, other than to have Day observe to Wilson that “you missed your chance—if war is what you want—when the Germans sank the *Lusitania*.”⁴³ For Vidal, as for T.P. Gore before him, the First World War (like the Civil War and the Spanish-American War) represents a clear dividing line. Although much of the social change associated with the 1920s had started before the war, as Henry May argued persuasively in *The End of American Innocence*, it was for Vidal the war which determined how that change manifested itself. Throughout *Lincoln*, *Empire*, and *Hollywood*, he demonstrates that the concentration of federal power threatened the idea of American exceptionalism because it undermined the notion of plurality. “The great democracy,” the narrative of *Hollywood* maintains, “had decreed that one could only have a single view of a most complex war; otherwise the prison was there to receive those who chose not to conform to the government’s line.” The social and political liberties guaranteed by the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, he concluded, were therefore undermined. This moreover heralded a monolithic, federal, definition of the historical record which precluded the idea of an American exceptionalism.

In addition, Vidal demonstrates the historical precedents for the end of social and political liberties under the Cold War. The question he is therefore concerned with in *Hollywood* is how the war altered the nation itself and the role played by the media in this transformation. He emphasises the extent to which the control of Hollywood was crucial to the war effort. This control was masterminded by the former Hearst journalist George Creel, who was recruited on America’s entry into

⁴³ Ibid., 43. It is worth noting that Day is notably different from his incarnation in *Washington, D.C.* and far less like T.P. Gore, who has a cameo in *Hollywood*.

the war as part of Wilson's drive, the narrative comments, "to establish control over every aspect of American life." The object of censorship, as Vidal has Creel define it, is "to give the good news about our side, and the bad news about the Huns. In a way," he follows, "it's like advertising." Under censorship, the idea of America is more and more that of a product, to be sold and repackaged as the times require. What Hearst achieved in the Spanish-American war, Vidal demonstrates, the federal government achieved under Creel's direction in the 1917-1918 war: through its control of the media it could determine public understanding of the war aims and the idea of America itself. Thus in July 1918, when the German army "occupied more of Europe than anyone ever had before . . . it was necessary for the Allies to pretend they were winning. So, if not on the field, on film American marines kept on destroying the Huns."⁴⁴

In an interview for the London *Guardian*, Vidal argued that this understanding of Hollywood was germane to the 1980s because the use of the industry as a political tool inaugurated a process which the presidency of Ronald Reagan completed. Reagan, he observed, "reflects automatically the old America which was created by L.B. Mayer and MGM in the 1930s and '40s, the world of Andy Hardy and small town America." What is more, he continued, as Hollywood mythology could bring about the Reagan presidency, it could also redefine the geopolitical role of the US. This, he argued, is what the series of *Rambo* films achieved for Vietnam in the '80s: "we go out and fight wars which we lose, then we make films showing how we won them, and the films make more money than the war lost. Now you've got to admit America still has some genius."⁴⁵ The "genius" of America, Vidal observed, is that its institutions and its ideals are realised not in practice but in fiction.

⁴⁴ *Hollywood*, 106, 107, 176.

⁴⁵ Jonathan Coe, 'Don't look for Athens,' *Guardian*, November 2, 1989.

The potential of the cinema is therefore, as the fictional Caroline Sanford realises, far greater than mere propaganda, for “eventually the audience would learn all the tricks.” The real power of Hollywood, the power that would, as Vidal understood it, shape the rest of the twentieth century, is to determine what people dream. Sanford, whose work as a newspaper publisher in *Empire* and film star/producer in *Hollywood* demonstrates Vidal’s thesis, realises that movies “were like waking dreams, that then, in sleep, usurped proper dreams.” More than propaganda, a function the newspapers could easily fill, she understands that the motion picture had limitless potential for it was, in effect, a “parallel reality,” a space that was simultaneously real and not real. Such power far exceeds the political meddlings of Hearst in *Empire* and the federal government in *Hollywood*. A film producer, she proposes, “can invent the people.”

Caroline suddenly realised that she—and everyone else—had been approaching this new game from the wrong direction. Movies were not there to simply reflect life or tell stories, but to exist in an autonomous way and to look, as it were, back at those who made them and watched them. They had used the movies to successfully demonise national enemies. Now why not use them to alter the viewer’s perception of himself and the world?

It is *this* medium which had created the fictional Myra Breckinridge, as it had, to a significant extent, created Vidal. A great part of his understanding of the twentieth century began in the cinema, and in *Hollywood* he concludes that such understanding is, in the end, a dream. “There is no country here,” as Caroline Sanford reasons, “no real country anywhere, I suppose, except in dreams.”⁴⁶ Vidal’s conception of America, and his disappointed idealism, is the product of such dreams.

LIVE FROM GOLGOTHA AND THE END OF THE AMERICAN EMPIRE

⁴⁶ *Hollywood*, 176, 240, 448, 447.

For Vidal, the empire which reached its peak in 1945 came to an end when in September 1985 the United States became a debtor nation and “the money power shifted from New York to Tokyo.” This, he concluded, was the product of a militarised economy.⁴⁷ The argument over the relative decline of America—which “in the few years from 1982 to 1986,” Geir Lundestad noted, “went from being the world’s largest creditor to being its largest debtor”⁴⁸—accelerated after the 1988 publication of Paul Kennedy’s *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*. While Kennedy wrote that the US “is at present still in a class of its own,” like Vidal he argued that its economy was in decline as a result of global military commitments, “of what might roughly be called ‘imperial overstretch.’”⁴⁹ As the debate raged it was clear that the Japanese economy was ascendant.⁵⁰ The US trade deficit with Japan, the economic historians James Petras and Morris Morley noted in 1995, had been “running between \$40 billion and \$50 billion annually since the mid-1980s.” In 1990, 41 cents of every dollar retained by the hundred largest banks were in Japanese financial institutions, as compared to 11 in the US. Furthermore, a 1988 report to Congress stated that Japanese blue-collar workforce “can interpret advanced mathematics, read complex engineering blue-prints, and perform sophisticated tasks on the factory floor far better than blue collars in the US.”⁵¹ What this change would mean to the United States is the hinge of Vidal’s satirical allegory *Live From Golgotha* (1992).

At the end of the 1980s, Vidal wrote in the essay ‘Gods and Greens’ that the United States faced what was in effect an identity crisis. The Russian economic

⁴⁷ ‘The Day the American Empire Ran Out of Gas,’ *US*, 1008.

⁴⁸ Geir Lundestad, *The American “Empire”*, (London, 1990), 90.

⁴⁹ Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, 1988 (London, 1989), 665, 666.

⁵⁰ I have not repeated the arguments here. See Lundestad, *The American “Empire”*, 86-87, and James Petras and Morris Morley, *Empire or Republic? American Global Power and Domestic Decay* (New York, 1995), ix-xv.

⁵¹ Petras and Morley, *Empire or Republic?*, 31, 58, 59.

crisis, and change in foreign policy under the leadership of Mikhail Gorbachev, meant the Cold War had reached an end. “[B]y opting out of our peculiar version of Paradise Lost,” Vidal wrote, the US was “bereft of a beloved enemy.” He believed this heralded “a realignment of official enemies.”⁵² The struggle over the history of Jesus Christ in *Live From Golgotha* is a commentary on the forces involved in this realignment. The premise is that a computer hacker is systematically destroying Christianity by erasing the gospels from history. One time-tape however, that of Timothy, disciple to Saint Paul, is rendered hackerproof. In A.D. 96 Timothy is contacted by NBC, who first hope to take a film crew back to Golgotha and, in a bid to win the spring ratings battle, broadcast the crucifixion live, and second propose that Timothy write his version of the sacred story, soon to be found when twentieth century archaeologists discover it in his cathedral, and thus save Christianity. From the interests that own the television networks, to New Age thinkers, to the ascendant Japanese, the players in the drama are engaged in a contest over the meaning of Christianity, and, as a result, over Western civilisation. The hacker who threatens the religion is himself a metaphor that describes how each of the players, through its access to the media, rewrites history. As Saint Paul instructs Timothy, “memory is easily tampered with not only by the Prince of this World and by other demons but by constant exposure to CNN on television. You are being subtly altered at every moment.”⁵³ To understand what this would mean in the post-Cold War America, Vidal staged a battle over the Greatest Story Ever Told with the Americans in the foreground and the Japanese in the background.

The allegorical point to *Live From Golgotha* is that modern empires are sustained by whoever is in control of the media. The introduction of the computer hacker into this equation represented a new threat to state control, the potential of

⁵² ‘Gods and Greens,’ *US*, 1041. (*Observer*, August 27, 1989.)

⁵³ *Live From Golgotha* (London, 1992), 174.

which was realised in November 1988, when the hacker Robert Morris released an Internet virus that infected approximately six thousand computers across America, including the Pentagon's ARPAnet data exchange network. The event sparked a media scare which Andrew Ross described in his essay 'Hacking Away at the Counterculture' as "endemic to the paranoid style of American political culture."⁵⁴ The government advertisement "Never accept gifts from a stranger..." for instance, depicted a stereotypically Jewish man disguised as Santa Claus who hands infected software to an unsuspecting child.⁵⁵ The moral crusade that resulted from the threat of viral contamination was dependent on political demonisation and as a consequence, Ross concluded, a "social class or group has been defined and categorised as 'enemies of the state' in order to help categorise a general law-and-order clampdown on free and open informations exchange."⁵⁶ The advent of the hacker, in other words, enabled federal and corporate power to assert control over the computer revolution and the ideological dangers of a reasonably uncensored information network. Under the shadow of the hacker, Timothy's writing in *Live From Golgotha* is the allegorical battleground for this control. Without the security of Cold War rhetoric, Vidal demonstrates, there is an opening for a new 'truth,' or, rather, for the reinterpretation of a truth now past. What emerges is that the *idea* of the hacker has always been essential to the establishment of ideological control.

Throughout *Live From Golgotha*, Vidal therefore represents Saint Paul as the original rewriter (or ideological hacker) of the Christ story. Timothy's narrative describes how Paul invented Christianity, and through his calculated use of the available media, established it as a religion. By the time Paul had taken the message to Rome, Timothy writes, Christianity "was not only pretty much his invention but it was kept together by his energy and his mastery of cross-filing and, of course, the

⁵⁴ Andrew Ross, *Strange Weather* (London, 1991), 76.

⁵⁵ Philip Fites, Peter Johnston and Martin Kratz, *The Computer Virus Crisis* (1992), 98.

⁵⁶ Ross, *Strange Weather*, 81.

Follow-up Letter.” Furthermore, Vidal’s Jesus is enormously fat, and his voice was “so shrill,” Saint Paul reports, “that only the odd canine ever got the whole message, hence the need for interpretation and self-consciousness—in short, mega-fiction.”⁵⁷ There is to this joke a serious historical point. As George Bernard Shaw wrote in his preface to *Androcles and the Lion*, Paul’s conversion to Christianity “was no conversion at all: it was Paul who converted the religion that raised man above sin and death into a religion that delivered millions of men so completely into their dominion that their own common nature became abhorrent to them, and the religious life became a denial of life.”⁵⁸ (This is moreover how Vidal represented Saint Paul through the character of Paul Himmel in *Messiah*.) In the introduction to her book *The First Christian*, Karen Armstrong wrote of Paul, “he created Christian theology, and sometimes it seems as though he were more important to Christianity than Jesus Christ.” In *Live from Golgotha* Paul is definitively more important than Jesus for it transpires that the Jesus whom he met on the road to Damascus was in fact a hologram of Judas. The ‘real’ Jesus had tricked the Roman guards into believing he was Judas in the incident at the Garden of Gethsemane, and with the aid of the Zionist Dr. Cutler then escaped to the twentieth century. Armstrong moreover wrote that “Christ would have found it difficult to recognise certain elements in Christianity if he returned to earth today.”⁵⁹ In the Gospel according to Gore Vidal he considers a law suit. “What the goy-loving creep Solly did to my story is, frankly, actionable,” Jesus informs Timothy.⁶⁰ Vidal’s Jesus is a revolutionary whose aim is to realise the work of the Old Testament prophets and to bring on the day of Judgement. He is the Hacker Timothy’s writing is designed to stop.

⁵⁷ *Live From Golgotha*, 144, 32.

⁵⁸ George Bernard Shaw, *Androcles and the Lion*, 1916 (London, 1931), 75-76.

⁵⁹ Karen Armstrong, *The First Christian* (London, 1983), 11, 12.

⁶⁰ *Live From Golgotha*, 192.

Jesus, who is in *Live From Golgotha* an employee of General Electric, informs Timothy that there was no way he could “defeat the Romans and restore Israel” in his own time-frame.⁶¹ He could, however, in the twentieth century, with the power of the electronic media in his hands. Vidal’s target here is certain New York intellectuals, apologists for Israel, with whom he had quarrelled in the aftermath of the essay ‘The Day the American Empire Ran Out of Gas.’ In writing about the economic decline of the superpowers, Vidal proposed an end to the arms race, and suggested the US “make common cause with” Russia. “[C]ombined,” he wrote, the two countries “would be a match, industrially and technologically, for the Sino-Japanese axis that will dominate the future just as Japan dominates world trade today.”⁶² In response, the neoconservative Norman Podhoretz denounced Vidal’s characterisation of an America “in which, as we now see it, the blessings of freedom and prosperity are greater and more widely shared than in any country known to human history.”⁶³ In the high profile 125th edition of *The Nation*, published on March 22, 1986, Vidal reasoned that his ideas were attacked because “to get Treasury money for Israel . . . pro-Israel lobbyists must see to it that America’s ‘the Russian’s are coming’ squads are in place so that they can frighten the Amercian people into spending enormous sums for ‘defense’, which also means the support of Israel in its never-ending wars against just about everyone.”⁶⁴ The controversy generated in the aftermath of this essay bore *Live From Golgotha*,⁶⁵ the first thirty-eight pages of which were written between July 31 and August 7, 1987.⁶⁶

⁶¹ Ibid., 194.

⁶² ‘The Day the American Empire Ran Out of Gas,’ *US*, 1015. This was first delivered as a lecture in October 1985.

⁶³ Norman Podhoretz, ‘A Herd of Writers, Hostile to America,’ *Washington Post*, December 4, 1985.

⁶⁴ ‘A Cheerful Response,’ *US*, 1018. (*Nation*, March 22, 1986.)

⁶⁵ For a good summary of the impact the article had, see Andrew Kopkind, ‘Vidalgate,’ reprinted in Vidal’s *Armageddon?* (London, 1987) 131-135, and Charles Glass, ‘Gore, Poddy and Midge,’ *The Spectator*, September 20, 1986, 11-13.

⁶⁶ After writing *Hollywood*, Vidal returned to the manuscript on October 24, 1989. He reenvisioned the narrative to accommodate the changes in media technology represented by the Internet. The third handwritten draft is dated October 10, 1990 and runs through to 13 July, 1991. GVC, M93-124, Folder 26.

For Vidal, the relationship between the United States and Israel was particular to its systemic decline. In *Live From Golgotha* Vidal took on the neoconservative warmongers in the Israel lobby and, controversially, allied them with the Zionist cause of the revolutionary Jesus. Yet, of greater importance, while this contest rages and plays out its threat to social and political freedoms, the ascendant empire, Japan, is arresting control over the machinery of power. Although Timothy identifies Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane when he travels back in time with the NBC film crew, Christianity is not saved. Through the intervention of the Japanese-owned cartel Gulf + Eastern, Jesus is seen to be embraced on the cross by the sun goddess Ameratsu, from whom the Japanese emperor descends. "A voice-over, not mine," Timothy writes, concludes that "as foreseen, and foretold by John the Baptist, Jesus returns to his ancestress, the Goddess of the Sun, the ultimate divinity, Ameratsu." Timothy then discovers that this is the creation of special effects engineered by "the Japanese Hollywood flagship, MCA Universal."⁶⁷ (The Japanese firm Matsushita bought MCA in 1990.)⁶⁸ The point of *Live From Golgotha* is that history is no more than a record of interpretation, and that in the age dependent on the electronic media, "time," as Timothy is instructed, "is just a flat round plate."⁶⁹ The power to control that interpretation is the domain of the richest power, of those who can afford to own, and as a result to manipulate, the media. At the end of the narrative Japan is the ascendant economic power, and the final pages herald a new empire for the narrative begins over with a text written in Japanese.

Concurrent with this reading of empire there is an attack on the use of religion as an ideological tool to warrant imperial expansion. To call *Live From*

⁶⁷ *Live From Golgotha*, 224.

⁶⁸ Petras and Morley, *Empire or Republic?*, 42. Sony had also bought Columbia Pictures, and Toshiba a significant part of Time-Warner.

⁶⁹ *Live From Golgotha*, 16.

Golgotha anti-Jewish or anti-Christian is somewhat irrelevant for Vidal is an opposition of *all* religion. This point is fundamental to an understanding of his entire body of work. From *Messiah* onward, Vidal has opposed religion as an absolute which by its very nature threatened the proposed exceptionalism of the United States. “Ordinarily, as a descendant of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment which shaped our Republic,” Vidal wrote in ‘Monotheism and its Discontents’ (1992), “I would say live and let live.” Yet the monotheists “won’t let me. They are too busy. They have a divine mission to take away our rights as private citizens.” As a result, he concluded, “Jefferson’s famous tree of liberty . . . is dying before our eyes.”⁷⁰ What *Lincoln*, *Empire*, *Hollywood*, and *Live From Golgotha* demonstrate is that monotheism has been fundamental to the history of empire. In his second inaugural address, Abraham Lincoln absolved himself and indeed mankind for the bloodshed of the Civil War, on the grounds that “[t]he Almighty has His own purposes.”⁷¹ In the conquest of the Phillipines, it is the will of God that is again invoked. In deciding on annexation, Vidal has McKinley state, “I knew God was speaking to and through me.”⁷² This only continued in the 1980s, in which God featured at the heart of the Cold War, with Reagan’s emphasis on the fight against the Evil Empire, and the inevitable showdown at Armageddon.⁷³ For Vidal, the United States was a promised land of liberty, not of the Puritan values of the sixteenth century, nor an alternative to the promised land of Zion. Religion, he argued, is used to serve political ends, and is in effect an enemy of the people. In ‘Monotheism and its Discontents’ he concluded that it is time to face down the prejudices disguised under the rhetoric of the monotheistic religions and “achieve a nation not under God but under man—or should I say our common humanity?”⁷⁴

⁷⁰ ‘Monotheism and its Discontents,’ *US*, 1052, 1054. (*Nation*, July 13, 1992.)

⁷¹ *Lincoln*, 620; Abraham Lincoln, ‘Second Inaugural Address,’ *Speeches and Letters*, ed. Peter Parish (London, 1993), 289.

⁷² *Empire*, 112.

⁷³ Vidal explored this phenomenon in detail in the essay ‘Armageddon?’, *US*, 995-1006. (*Observer*, November 15, 1987.)

⁷⁴ ‘Monotheism and its Discontents,’ *US*, 1054.

In his 1995 memoir *Palimpsest*, Vidal first wrote at any length of his adolescent love, Jimmie Trimble, who was killed at Iwo Jima on March 1, 1945. "I," he lamented, "was to be the surviving half of what had once been whole."⁷⁵ The political and psychological significance of Trimble's death most clearly informs *The City and the Pillar*, *The Season of Comfort*, *A Search for the King*, *Washington, D.C.*, and *Two Sisters*. For William Gerard in *The Season of Comfort*, the death of his close friend Jimmy Wesson in the Pacific theatre of war marks the end of his youth; for Peter Sanford in *Washington, D.C.* the death of his friend Scotty in the war is integral to his disillusionment with the United States. In his 1998 novel *The Smithsonian Institution*, Vidal synthesises his historical and satirical projects in an imaginative bid to prevent Trimble's death and restore the Republic. The protagonist is the teenage genius T.—both Trimble and Time—who is summoned to the Smithsonian on Good Friday, 1939, to work on the theoretical possibility of the atom bomb. When the institution closes its doors to the public, the exhibits come to life, and through his interaction with the exhibits T. discovers that he is to die in World War II. Applying his genius as a physicist to a time-travel device which predates his arrival, he then sets out to prevent the war from happening.⁷⁶ With the aid of Grover Cleveland he understands that to do this he must stop Woodrow Wilson from becoming president in 1912 and thus avert the American entry into the First World War.⁷⁷ At this point the narrative is freed from the constraints of the Trimble story

⁷⁵ *Palimpsest* (London, 1995), 35. Aristophanes' definition of the sexes in Plato's *Symposium* informs this.

⁷⁶ There is far more to this than I have indicated in this summary. Vidal is working so much biographical material into his narrative that it is almost impossible to effectively summarise.

⁷⁷ Although Grover Cleveland, the 22nd (1885-1889) and the 24th president (1893-1897) was the last to preside in the days of the Party of the People and before the empire, his strong anti-Populist stand makes him an odd choice. Nevertheless, H.L. Mencken wrote that Cleveland was devoted to "what he

and addresses that which his death represents. In the short sections dealing with this episode Vidal prevents both the Cold War and the creation of the national security state which he believed brought an end to the American Republic.

There are in *The Smithsonian Institution* two clear dividing lines in American history. The first is the war which brought an end to Trimble's life and to the republic, and the second is the 1917-1918 war. In preventing the Second World War, Vidal achieves for himself a country freed from the political tyranny he had come to oppose. In preventing the Wilson presidency, he is correcting an error of judgement made by his grandfather, Senator T.P. Gore, in endorsing Wilson first in 1912 and again in 1916. In the primary of 1912, Gore declared his support for Wilson rather than the Kentucky born representative of Missouri, Champ Clark.⁷⁸ In 1916, even after the defeat of the Gore-McLemore Resolutions, Gore again campaigned for Wilson. Vidal had drawn out the implications of this support in *Hollywood*. "Wilson was narrowly re-elected," the narrative states, and "this might not have happened if that professional spellbinder Gore had not been persuaded to leave his sulky seclusion in Oklahoma City and go to California and take the stump for Wilson. Gore had done so on the condition that he could guarantee that Wilson would continue to keep, as he had kept, the peace."⁷⁹ As a president maker, which is in effect how Vidal describes him in both *Hollywood* and *Palimpsest*, Gore was implicated in the American entry into a war he then opposed at great cost to his own political career.⁸⁰ In *The Smithsonian Institution* Vidal corrects this mistake.

conceived to be sound and honest courses" and would not be swayed by public opinion. ('A Good Man in a Bad Trade,' *The Vintage Mencken*, gathered by Alistair Cooke [1955], 215-216.) In his 1991 foreword to *The Impossible Mencken: a Selection of his Best Newspaper Stories*, Vidal praised Mencken as a great mythologiser of American cant. ('H.L. Mencken the Journalist,' *US*, 750-767.) This is perhaps explanation enough.

⁷⁸ For the details see chapter three.

⁷⁹ *Hollywood*, 42.

⁸⁰ *Palimpsest*, 55. I am not concerned with whether Gore was or was not a president-maker. It is enough that Vidal thought it might be so.

From his reading of history, Vidal's Grover Cleveland concludes of Wilson, "he, and he alone, got us into the European war in 1917 . . . He will then trick the Germans into surrendering while the Allies trick him into letting them bankrupt Germany." This would lead to war in 1939.⁸¹ T. then returns to 1910, and, with the help of Mrs. Grover Cleveland, persuades Wilson not to run for the governorship of New Jersey, which would prove his launching pad to the presidency.⁸² Champ Clark is then elected to the presidency, with William Jennings Bryan as his vice-president. When Clark dies in 1915 (rather than the actual 1921) the pacifist Bryan " 'single-handedly,' his own phrase, kept the United States out of the European war, which petered out in stalemate . . ." There is, of course, an air of fantastic unreality to all of this. The political hobby-horses Vidal rode throughout the 1980s are given credence when, in T.'s alternative history, "the United States and Russia, now the two great world powers, proceeded to work in concert to help rebuild the ruined economies of Britain, France, and Germany."⁸³ This is nevertheless the aim of the book. That T. forgets about the conflict with Japan, which then spells war with the bombing of Pearl Harbor (now in June 1940), enables Vidal to complete the narrative with the death and resurrection of T. on Easter Sunday, 1945, and the establishment of the American empire without the prospect of the Cold War. T., who is an amalgamation of the athletic Trimble and the political Vidal, is the new messiah.

In the end it is the militarised economy rather the idea of empire itself to which Vidal is opposed. In his satirical fiction, and in his essays on the Cold War era, he invariably identifies the critical juncture, the origin of the nation's systemic decline, as the institution of the military economy in the five years after the end of the Second World War. It was the result of then choosing not to disarm, but "to

⁸¹ *The Smithsonian Institution* (1998), 138.

⁸² The material is blackmail, but Vidal does not go into the details.

⁸³ *TSI*, 165. There is one drawback. Although not an imperialist, Bryan was a great advocate of religion.

maintain ourselves on a full military basis,” Vidal wrote in 1987, which led to the creation of “the National Security State in which we have been living for the last forty years.”⁸⁴ Thus although “it looked like we might be creating a civilization,” this golden age “aborted.”⁸⁵ For Vidal history was therein split in two: there is the “real government” of the country—“the more or less secret National Security State”—and there is “the cosmetic ‘constitutional’ government of Congress, the judiciary and the never ending, issueless presidential election.”⁸⁶ Vidal has maintained that this division is sanctioned by a powerful media machine owned for the most part by corporate interests who yield profit from this social and political hierarchy.

“What a long way we have come,” Vidal lamented in his 1996 television programme *Gore Vidal’s American Presidency*, “from Thomas Jefferson’s Declaration of Independence:”

We hold these truths to be sacred and undeniable: that all men are created equal and independent, that from that equal creation they derive rights inherent and inalienable, among which are the preservation of life, and liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.⁸⁷

Throughout his career Gore Vidal has held to this idea of America as a country outwith the hierarchy of the Old World. Yet the history of the United States, he reasoned in *Gore Vidal’s American Presidency*, has been one of imperial expansion and suppression of the right to liberty. “And now,” he concluded gesturing toward the Vietnam memorial, “my home city of Washington has become a vast memorial to those dead in wars that have glorified the odd president, enriched the military-

⁸⁴ ‘The National Security State,’ *US*, 1021-1022. (*Nation*, June 4, 1988.)

⁸⁵ Interview, Curt Supplee, ‘Gore Vidal, Acerbic Apostate,’ *International Herald Tribune*, July 27, 1984.

⁸⁶ Note to ‘Ollie,’ *A View from the Diner’s Club* (London, 1991), 183.

⁸⁷ *The American Presidency* (Chicago, 1998), 87. First screened as the three part *Gore Vidal’s American Presidency*, Channel 4, April 30 to May 14, 1996. This, significantly, is how Jefferson rendered the nation state exceptional in his original draft, which was then altered by Congress to read “endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights.” “The introduction of a Creator,” Vidal observed, “has done our independence no good.” ‘Mickey Mouse, Historian,’ *Virgin Islands*, 207. (*Nation*, September 30, 1996.)

industrial complex, but left the rest of us—we the people, the nation—with *this*.”⁸⁸ This final emphatic gesture is representative of Vidal’s disillusionment. It was through the war in Vietnam, he wrote in the 1993 introduction to the American historical novels, published as *Narratives of a Golden Age*, “we came to realize that, like everyone else, we are simply at sea in history and that somehow our republic had got mislaid upon the way.”⁸⁹ Yet even in the aftermath of this realisation, Vidal’s political idealism, which reached an apotheosis in the years after the end of the Second World War, continued to define his thinking. His dream of an American empire that promised to extend its exceptionalist principles to the entire world, and the failure of that dream, is the key to his writing.

⁸⁸ *The American Presidency*, 88. The emphasis is from the television programme.

⁸⁹ ‘Introduction,’ *Narratives of a Golden Age*, Burr (London, 1994), ix-x.

Appendices

I

GORE VIDAL, NORMAN MAILER, AND THE PROMISE OF JOHN F. KENNEDY

“In 1960,” Gore Vidal recalled in 1965, “politics and literature officially joined forces. The politician had literary longings and the writer saw himself as President.”¹ As both a politician and a writer Vidal was at the forefront of this movement, yet it is frequently Norman Mailer who is hailed as the writer who first recognised the promise of the Kennedy presidency.² Mailer, like Vidal, understood Kennedy as an antidote to the mediocrity of the Eisenhower era. Waxing existential, Mailer wrote that Eisenhower, in contrast to Kennedy, “had been the anti-Hero, the regulator.” He argued that in an age governed by anxiety the American people sought security and not confrontation. He consequently observed that in the aftermath of the Second World War the country retreated into the mediocrity of security in order to contend with an uncertain history.

The Forties was a decade when the speed with which one’s own events occurred seemed as rapid as the history of the battlefields, and for the mass of people in America a forced march into a new jungle of emotion was the result. The surprises, the failures, and the dangers of that life must have terrified some nerve of awareness in the power and the mass, for, as if stricken by the orgiastic vistas the myth had carried up from underground, the retreat to a more conservative existence was disorderly, the fear of communism spread like an irrational hail of boils. To anyone who could see, the excessive hysteria of the Red wave was no preparation to face an enemy but rather a terror of the national self.³

¹ ‘Writers and the World,’ *US*, 44. (*TLS*, November 25, 1965.)

² In *A Thousand Days*, for one, Arthur Schlesinger harps on about Mailer as if, of all the writers to have been involved with Kennedy, he was the one of greatest importance.

³ Norman Mailer, ‘Superman Comes to the Supermarket,’ *The Presidential Papers* (London, 1964), 40. (*Esquire*, October 1960.)

Mailer reasoned that the terror of Communism which raged after the war was indicative not of an actual threat to the United States but of the longing for security. As a result the mediocrity of the Eisenhower era was a retreat from the possibility for growth conceived in the aftermath of war. He concluded that this reflected “the unspoken war of the century” between the city, “which is dynamic, orgiastic, unsettling, explosive, and accelerating to the psyche,” and the small town, “which is rooted, narrow, cautious, and planted in the life-logic of the family.” The small town psychology of the Eisenhower administration, he continued, deprived the ‘50’s “of colour, character, and the development of novelty.” The New England sophisticate Kennedy, on the other hand, promised to reinvigorate the United States by reintroducing the psychology of the city into national politics. Analogous to Vidal and the litany of apologists, Mailer celebrated Kennedy as a new dawn for American politics that would at the same time realise the potential of the post-war era.⁴

The attraction of this new era for Mailer and Vidal was the promise of a release from the intellectual bankruptcy of the new media augmented by the Eisenhower era. Throughout the 1950’s Mailer’s career was prey to the same forces that led Vidal to abandon the novel. After the tremendous success of *The Naked and the Dead* (1948), his second novel, *Barbary Shore* (1951), was dismissed by *Time* as “paceless, tasteless, and graceless.” Of its fifty-five reviews, Mailer recalled in *Advertisements for Myself*, only five were positive.⁵ “[I]t’s reviews proved to be as

⁴ Although there is a marked similarity here not usually commented on, Vidal and Mailer were otherwise antithetical in their considerations as writers. Mailer was the butch (and sometime homophobic) heterosexual hipster trying to carve out a role for post-war Man, whereas Vidal worked to demythologise such stereotypes of masculine behaviour. (This is not to say that the division is in any way straight forward.) In his essay ‘America and Vidal Chronicles,’ Donald E. Pease draws out the distinction between Mailer and Vidal. He argues that unlike Vidal, Mailer did not abandon the “combat soldier within” to explore the nature of sexuality. (*Writer Against the Grain*, ed. Jay Parini [London, 1992], 249.) Instead Mailer depicted post-war Man in a fight against the influence of a non-political homosexuality over the literary community. This ground is also covered by Heather Neilson in her 1991 thesis on Vidal. However, I wanted to explore a similarity between the two writers that has not been fully addressed.

⁵ Norman Mailer, ‘Third Advertisement for myself,’ *Advertisements for Myself* (London, 1968), 98.

bad,” Mailer wrote, “as the reviews for *The Naked and the Dead* had been good.”⁶ Subsequent to the critical failure of his third novel, *The Deer Park* (1955), Mailer retreated into journalism, and co-founded the *Village Voice* in 1955. “He was angry, convinced that there was something wrong with an American establishment that so mercilessly oppressed creative souls such as himself,” his biographer Hilary Mills wrote.⁷ In his journalism Mailer attacked the mediocrity of the Eisenhower era. In this he concurred with Vidal. “I did not suspect,” Vidal wrote of Mailer’s initial success, “that the ambitious, rather cold-blooded young contemporary who had set out to write the big war novel would some day be in the same fix as I was. Not safe. Not wise. Not admired. A fellow victim of the Great Golfer’s Age.”⁸ What Kennedy offered Vidal and Mailer was the reinvigoration of a electorate narcotised under the influence of the new media, and the restoration of an establishment deadened under the influence of the anti-intellectual Eisenhower.

The cultivation of the intellectual and the literary establishments was a core feature of the Kennedy campaign. “For twenty years,” Vidal wrote in 1960, “the culture and the mind of the United States ignored politics.” In the ‘40s and ‘50s, he observed, the “intellectual establishment opted for the word ‘alienation.’”⁹ The real contrast between Kennedy and Nixon, Mailer therefore concluded, was not necessarily a question of minor political differences but how each man would “radiate his appeal into some fundamental depths of the American character.” As a consequence

[o]ne would have an inkling at last if the desire of America was for drama or stability, for adventure or monotony. And this, this appeal to the psychic direction America would now choose for itself, was the element most promising about this election, for it gave the possibility that the country might be able to

⁶ Norman Mailer, ‘Preface to *Barbary Shore*.’ *The Time of Our Time* (London, 1998), 55.

⁷ Hilary Mills, *Mailer: A Biography* (1982), 162.

⁸ ‘Norman Mailer’s Self-Advertisements,’ *US*, 30. (*The Nation*, January 2, 1960.)

⁹ ‘Kennedy,’ *US*, 798. (*Sunday Telegraph*, April 9, 1961.)

finally rise above the deadening verbiage of its issues, its politics, its jargon, and live once again by an image of itself.¹⁰

What clearly attracted both the intellectual and literary establishments to Kennedy was his elevation of the *idea* of America. Kennedy promised the fulfilment of the idea of exceptionalism through returning to an understanding that the American experiment was not about stability but adventure.

To wax Maileresque, Kennedy was the knight errant who promised to free the passive intellectual from the confines of the ivory tower. He promised squares such as Sorenson and Schlesinger (who abandoned his monumental work on FDR to work for Kennedy) an Horatio Alger world of action and adventure. "These best and the brightest felt intimidated by the suspicion that Americans consider art and culture 'sissy stuff,'" Garry Wills observed in *The Kennedy Imprisonment*. "Yet here was a war-hero President saying it was alright to listen to Bach, to like art and French wines." Wills concluded that an "embarrassing gush of gratitude for this largesse" therefore corrupted the memoirs of Sorenson and Schlesinger.¹¹ This was characteristic of the praise for Kennedy. He was able to charm the intellectual or literary figure through appealing to their private yearnings. He fulfilled the need for an existential hero that obsessed Mailer in the late 1950s. He appeared to be the intellectual politician aware of the relationship between thought and action that Vidal desired. "What doubts one may have had," Vidal recalled some years after the illusion had failed, "were obscured by the charm and intelligence of John F. Kennedy. He appeared to be beautifully onto himself... As a result, there were few intellectuals in 1960 who were not beguiled by the spectacle of a president who seemed always to be standing at a certain remove from himself, watching with amusement his own performance. He was," Vidal concluded, "an ironist in a

¹⁰ Mailer, 'Superman Comes to the Supermarket,' 58.

¹¹ Garry Wills, *The Kennedy Imprisonment*, (1983), 152.

profession where the prize usually goes to the apparent cornball.”¹² As Kennedy appealed to insecurity of the squares Sorenson and Schlesinger, so he appealed to Vidal’s demand for the irony and satire he argued had been bled out of mainstream culture throughout the Eisenhower era.

Furthermore, the opposition Vidal encountered from the mainstream media throughout the election only served to confirm the Kennedy appeal. The Republican media that dominated the 29th District made it difficult for Vidal to generate sufficient favourable coverage. It observed Eisenhower democracy, and consistently dismissed Vidal’s ideas both on federal aid to education and the recognition of Red China, with no explanation, as unconstitutional. Moreover, when a local paper decided to back him Republican businessmen withdrew their advertising.¹³ However, Vidal’s irrepressible sarcasm, and his tendency to resort to jokes when faced with opposition, handed the press the necessary ammunition to attack him. Late in the campaign Vidal made the somewhat impolitic remark that “every four years, about 20,000 extra people crawl out of their Hudson Gothic woodwork up here to vote for President McKinley.” More unfortunately, he said this to Ira Henry Freeman, a journalist for his confirmed enemy, *The New York Times*. Vidal recalled in *Palimpsest* that Richard Rovere had previously warned him of an imminent smear by the *Times*. Freeman was then sent to interview him, and produced an article that described the election as a contest between Vidal the effete rich playboy, who “sprawled barefooted in a gilded fauteuil of his luxurious octagonal Empire study,” and the humble Ernest J. Wharton, who, “although his family is wealthy” lived “modestly” in Schenectady.¹⁴ The reaction of the *Times* to the publication of *The City and the Pillar* in 1948 grounded Vidal’s opposition to the press. It again

¹² ‘The Holy Family,’ *US*, 809-810. (*Esquire*, April 1967.)

¹³ Bernard F. Dick, *The Apostate Angel* (1974), 119.

¹⁴ Ira Henry Freeman, ‘Gore Vidal Conducts Campaign of Quips and Liberal Views,’ *NYT*, September 15, 1960. *Palimpsest*, 338, 348-349.

confirmed his opinion with this stunt. The hostility of the media therefore augmented his confidence in Kennedy enterprise and his ability to restore the place of the intellectual within the political machine.

As a writer and a politician, Vidal was therefore the ideal audience for Kennedy. However, subsequent to a quotation from a 1961 diary, in which he had praised Kennedy for being “a writer *manqué*,” Vidal wrote in his 1995 memoir *Palimpsest*. “What an actor he was! What a gullible audience I was!”¹⁵ Within the Kennedy entourage the intellectual was there to perform a designated function. “You were always expected to do things for the Kennedys,” Vidal recalled in 1975, “they never did anything for you.”¹⁶ A crucial function Vidal performed was to introduce the literary establishment to Kennedy. In a letter dated 12 June, roughly three weeks before the Democratic Convention, Vidal wrote that although his time was ruled by his own campaign he could “act as emissary to those liberal establishments to which I have a key” (*The Nation*, *Partisan Review*). He also advised that “you should meet the various contiguous worlds of Norman Mailer, Philip Rahv, Trilling, etc. They view you with suspicion but I have a hunch that you could win them around.” Vidal offered to arrange a meeting. “Their influence,” he concluded, “is formidable.”¹⁷ Consequently Vidal staged a party at the Convention which introduced writers and Hollywood moguls to the politicians. Mailer was present.

Mailer’s support for Kennedy played a significant part in how journalists would interpret the Kennedy image. Mailer was at the forefront of the New Journalism, which was characterised by the fact, as Mailer described it, that “the narrator was one of the elements in the way the reader would finally assess the experience. I had felt that I had some dim intuitive feeling that what was wrong with

¹⁵ *Palimpsest*, 368.

¹⁶ *Views from a Window*, 271.

¹⁷ Letter to JFK, June 12, 1960, ‘The Letters of Gore Vidal,’ 22, GVC, M97-209, Box 2, Folder 17.

all journalism is that the reporter tended to be objective and that that was one of the great lies of all time.”¹⁸ In 1957 he had published the much lauded essay ‘The White Negro.’ In it he defined the concept of hip for 1950s existentialist man. Mailer argued that in the shadow of the concentration camp and the atom bomb overt dissent had ceased. Onto this “bleak scene” the existentialist, “the hipster,” appeared. The hipster lived with danger, and in contrast to the culture of conformity “set out on that uncharted journey into the rebellious imperatives of the self.” Mailer concluded that in the current generation

[o]ne is Hip, or one is Square... one is a rebel or one conforms, one is a frontiersman in the Wild West of American night life, or else a Square cell, trapped in the totalitarian issues of American society, doomed willy-nilly to conform if one is to succeed.¹⁹

This dichotomy informed his analysis of Kennedy. Subsequent to the Convention, Mailer wrote his appraisal, and cast Kennedy as the new existential hero who would promise liberation from the mediocrity of the 50s. The article, the *New York Post* journalist Pete Hamill recalled, changed the face of journalism by offering a change from the political reporting of Theodore White and Richard Rovere.²⁰ Moreover, it strengthened Kennedy’s image. Kennedy was now seen as cool because, as Vidal wrote, Mailer had conferred on him “the moment’s accolade” in calling him “a ‘hipster.’”²¹

The support of Mailer was illustrative of how Kennedy strengthened his media image through the emissaries of the liberal intellectual establishment. Mailer was won over by what in retrospect can be understood as the classic Kennedy practice. The finest impression Kennedy made in their interview, Mailer wrote, “was

¹⁸ Interview with Hilary Mills, *Mailer*, 194-195. Mailer’s foray into New Journalism climaxed with the publication of *The Armies of the Night* in 1968.

¹⁹ ‘The White Negro,’ *Advertisements for Myself*, 270, 271, 272.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 213.

²¹ ‘Writers and the World,’ *United States*, 44. (TLS, November 25, 1965.)

a passing remark whose importance was invisible on the scale of politics but proved altogether meaningful to my particular competence.” Kennedy remarked that he had read Mailer’s books. “I’ve read *The Deer Park*... and the others,” he said. Mailer wrote that this startled him, “for it was the first time in a hundred similar situations . . . that the sentence did not come out, ‘I’ve read *The Naked and the Dead*... and the others.’ If one is to take the worst and assume that Kennedy was briefed for this interview (which is most doubtful), it still speaks well for the striking instinct of his advisers.”²² Of course, Kennedy *was* briefed. Notwithstanding Vidal’s advice, Kennedy was unsure if an interview with Mailer would help him. He was viewed as unstable. However, the author Peter Maas recalled that he advised Pierre Salinger that Kennedy not praise *The Naked and the Dead*, but *The Deer Park*: “if you really want him eating out of your hand, have Kennedy say this.” Salinger reported that this tactic worked.²³

Kennedy offered Mailer everything he could want his existential hero to be: “a war hero, and the heroism is bona-fide, even exceptional, a man who has lived with death, who, crippled in the back, took an operation that would kill him or restore him to power.”²⁴ He also flattered Mailer on an issue of professional insecurity. The critical failure of *The Deer Park* had infuriated him. This anger was at the core of his attack on the Eisenhower era. Kennedy proved himself to be altogether different from the preceding administration and consequently ensured Mailer’s deference. This practice was of fundamental importance to how Kennedy secured the formidable influence of the liberal media and was elected president through promising a nation the fulfilment of their dreams.

²² Mailer, ‘Superman Comes to the Supermarket,’ 47.

²³ Mills, *Mailer*, 210-211.

²⁴ Mailer, ‘Superman Comes to the Supermarket,’ 44.

As a consequence of this strategy Vidal and Mailer respectively characterised the Pied Piper Kennedy as the new messiah. This conclusion is at the heart of Vidal's disillusionment first with the Kennedys and second with the American empire. Mailer argued that Kennedy was the antidote to "the unmistakable tendency" of the twentieth century toward "the creation of men as interchangeable as commodities," of "mass man." He reasoned that the United States was the country most vulnerable to homogenisation because it lacked the historical roots to constrain it. Eisenhower, he continued, perpetuated that trend, yet Kennedy represented a way out. Kennedy was the hero, and as such he "embodies his time and is not so very much better than his time, but he is larger than life and so is capable of giving direction to his time, able to encourage a nation to the deepest colors of its character." Mailer concluded that Kennedy would turn the country away from the homogenisation of the supermarket '50's, the "packaged commodities, and ranch homes, interchangeable, geographically unrecognizable, that essence of the new postwar SuperAmerica."²⁵ Like Vidal, Mailer understood that this new messiah would dispel the media-defined culture of conformity and celebrate the potential of the individual.

Vidal outlined the same conclusion in a letter to the President-elect. One of the central issues raised in his campaign, Vidal wrote, was the problem of the "individual against the mass." He observed that in relation to government, the labour organisation, a conglomerate such as IBM (a major employer in the 29th District) the individual felt insignificant. "I think a President who will openly recognise this fear for what it is, who shows a sensitivity to the origin of that fear, will go a long way toward winning the sympathy and the allegiance of the many. To state the unstated in a society seems peculiarly the task of a great leader." Vidal concluded that yes, this

²⁵ Ibid., 38-39, 42, 32.

may be gesture politics, but it is a wholly different gesture, and in his “understanding is a beginning.”²⁶

There is however a crucial difference between the arguments of Mailer and Vidal . Mailer was caught up in the euphoria of existential man striding like a colossus over the homogenous supermarket chains of '50s America. He is concerned with the consequences of the Eisenhower era and uses them as a paradigm for his analysis. Vidal conversely concentrated on the use of television as a conduit for the management of an anxious people. He focused on the power of the medium through which such paradigms were created. His conclusion that, unlike Nixon, Kennedy was a true politician at a remove from the dishonest manipulation of the television electorate, was at the root of his disillusion.

An understanding of Vidal's disillusionment can be drawn from the conclusion Mailer also reached that Kennedy represented a chance to repair the damage inflicted by the anxiety of the post-war years. The situation described at the end of the Eisenhower era had its antecedents in Vidal's 1954 novel *Messiah*. In the introductory chapter the narrator Eugene Luther describes the insecurity of the mid-century as a result of the “the reluctant custody of the world the second world war had pressed on the confused grandchildren of a proud, isolated people, both indifferent and strange to the ways of other cultures.” This conclusion is at the heart of Mailer's analysis of the '50s. Luther observes that the anxiety at first took the outward form of UFO sightings, whose inhabitants “must, of necessity, be hostile and cruel and bent on world domination, just like ourselves or at least our geographic neighbours.” The premise of *Messiah* is that out of this confusion and rejection of nonconformity “a new mission had been conceived” which answered the indefinite need for a credible authority. “And that, finally.” Luther concludes, “was the

²⁶ Letter to the President-Elect, November 14, 1960, GVC. Box 10, Folder 1.

prevailing note of the age: since reason had been declared deficient only a mystic could provide the answer, only he could mark the boundaries of life with a final authority, inscrutably revealed.”²⁷ In *Messiah* Vidal created the form of that answer in the television messiah John Cave.

There is a striking resemblance between the mystic John Cave and the definition of the hipster in ‘The White Negro.’ This has an extraordinary bearing on the appeal of Kennedy to the disinherited writers Vidal and Mailer. In the narrative of *Messiah*, Vidal concluded that the mystic could flourish in the anxious post war society because the doctrine of reason was not enough to pacify the distinct anxieties of the era. The message that death is nothing, and therefore not to be feared, is at the core of Cave’s widespread appeal. In the final analysis, Luther argues that the way of the mystic was far more seductive than the distractions of psychoanalysis or “political and social action.”²⁸ Similarly, in ‘The White Negro,’ Mailer argued that the debate between the atheist and the existentialist was in fact a debate between the rationalist and the mystic. This debate, he observed, turned on an understanding of death. “In the dialogue between the atheist and the mystic, the atheist is on the side of life, rational life, undialectical life. Since he conceives of death as emptiness, he can, no matter how weary or despairing, wish for nothing but more life.” Conversely, the mystic and the hipster, or existentialist, are at one. “The mystic can accept the atheist’s description of his weakness, he can agree that his mysticism was a response to despair . . . and yet his argument is that he, the mystic, is finally the one has chosen to live with death.”²⁹ By definition to be a hipster is to understand what it means to live because he has accepted the idea of death. The Square, in contrast, would opt for safety and stability. As Mailer writes of the character Sam Slovoda in the short story ‘The Man Who Studied Yoga,’ “a man who seeks to live in such a

²⁷ *Messiah*, 1954 (London, 1993) 8, 5, 7, 11.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 10.

²⁹ Mailer, ‘The White Negro,’ 274.

way as to avoid pain . . . succeeds merely in avoiding pleasure.”³⁰ Mailer defined Kennedy as a hipster because he was a “frontiersman” and thus did not shy from the vista of possibility. However, when linked to Vidal’s understanding of the allure of the mystic, and the way in which the medium of television could be used to captivate a society dulled by anxiety, the promise of Kennedy the two writers envisioned is far more ominous.

II

THE 1961 CONFLICT WITH ROBERT KENNEDY

In his memoir *Palimpsest*, Vidal wrote that he then sent Robert Kennedy a copy of his article ‘Closing the Civilization gap,’ which listed two instances of abuse by the FBI, because as the Attorney General he “was in charge of the FBI. I got a terse acknowledgement for reply.”³¹ The tension between Vidal and Robert Kennedy dated back to the 1960 election. Vidal wrote that Kennedy berated him for seldom mentioning the ticket in his speeches. As he was in a predominantly Republican District, and running as a political independent, Vidal replied that this was “because I want to win.”³² In his 1978 work *Robert Kennedy and his Times*, the court apologist Arthur Schlesinger wrote that the antagonism in fact began when Kennedy failed to recognise Vidal when he arrived in Dutchess County to endorse the latter’s candidacy. Schlesinger suggested that Vidal was jealous of Robert Kennedy because he himself wanted to be president. In classic ‘see Jane run’ style, Schlesinger continued that Vidal was nevertheless “delighted to have friends in the White

³⁰ Mailer, ‘The Man Who Studied Yoga,’ *Advertisements for Myself*, 171.

³¹ *Palimpsest*, 393.

³² *Ibid.*, 349.

House,” and subsequently wrote “an adoring piece” on JFK.³³ What Schlesinger attempted was to give a background for a conflict between Vidal and Robert Kennedy that took place in November 1961, a few months after the publication of the article in *Esquire*.

Vidal placed his criticisms in *Esquire* at the centre of the argument. He recalled an incident in which he steadied himself on Jackie’s shoulder only to find his hand removed by Robert Kennedy. Vidal then confronted him, and demanded recognition of the article on the FBI. “He said it was none of my business. I said I could make it, or anything else, my business and in the most public way. ‘You... a writer?’ He was scornful. Kennedys *bought* writers.”³⁴ Aside from the conflict of personalities, the fight was for Vidal the consequence of a political issue. The criticism he published in *Esquire* was consistent with the Kennedy rhetoric, and as a contributor to the think-tank Vidal expected that his observations would result in action. This is of far greater importance than the actual fact of the conflict. Nevertheless, there is clearly a real case for arguing that the Kennedy spell was not broken until after this row and the uniform rejection from the clique in which he had immersed himself.

Vidal recalled that there were no other witnesses to the event. He claimed that, nevertheless, the Kennedys embellished the story in response to his 1963 essay ‘The Best Man 1968,’ which attacked Robert Kennedy as vindictive and “dangerously authoritarian-minded.”³⁵ He wrote that the White House issued “a cover story which had many versions,” all of which claimed “I had taken a sexual liberty with the First Lady and Bobby had defended her virtue.”³⁶ This story was

³³ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. *Robert Kennedy and His Times*, (London, 1978), 394-395.

³⁴ *Palimpsest*, 394.

³⁵ Reprinted as ‘Politics as Sport,’ *Rocking the Boat*, 56. (*Esquire*, March 1963.)

³⁶ This quotation is from a deposition prepared for counsel in the Vidal vs Capote libel suit, November 17, 1975, GVC, MCHC79-058, Box 2, Folder 7.

repeated by Kitty Kelley in her 1978 book *Jackie Oh!* Kelley wrote that Vidal was in fact dancing far too suggestively with the First Lady. "The sight of the President's wife being held so intimately by a man who publicly espoused bisexuality enraged the straight-laced Attorney General. He stormed onto the dance floor and pushed Gore away from Jackie. 'Don't you ever dance with the First Lady like that again. You make me sick.' " Kelley presented Robert Kennedy as the knight-errant and protector of the modesty of her heroine.³⁷ Similarly, Truman Capote repeated a version he claimed was told to him by Jackie's sister, Lee. "Bobby and Arthur Schlesinger, I believe it was, and one of the guards, just picked Gore up and threw him out into Pennsylvania Avenue. That's when he began to write all those cruel pieces on the Kennedy's."³⁸ The stories undermined the credibility of Vidal's criticisms of the Kennedys. Instead of a political issue, the attacks could be read as unmitigated acts of revenge.

This rhetorical link between the two events formed the standard line of attack. Schlesinger trumpeted this in *Robert Kennedy and His Times*, although he was careful as Vidal was in the process of suing Truman Capote for claiming that he was literally thrown out of the White House.³⁹ There was no major scene, Schlesinger wrote. "Someone, I forget who, perhaps Jacqueline Kennedy, asked me to whether I would get him out of there. I enlisted Kenneth Galbraith and George Plimpton. We took Vidal back to his hotel."⁴⁰ However, to add a further variation, Galbraith recalled a congenial walk home with Vidal after the party finished at 4 am. He did not write that he was enlisted by Schlesinger to escort the troublesome Vidal home. "I drank a lot of champagne," Galbraith wrote, "and remember telling Gore

³⁷ Kitty Kelley, *Jackie Oh!* (1978), 139.

³⁸ Interview in *Playgirl*, 'Truman Capote Talks About His Crowd,' September 1975. Capote is surely undone by the image of the frail Arthur Schlesinger involved in anything so unashamedly butch.

³⁹ The suit dragged on for eight years. It was resolved in 1983 when Capote wrote Vidal an apology and complete retraction.

⁴⁰ Schlesinger, *Robert Kennedy and His Times*, 385.

Vidal that Shakespeare was almost certainly better than he. Gore was mortally insulted but took it well.”⁴¹

Moreover, to add yet further confusion, Fred Kaplan stated in a 1996 letter to Vidal that, in a recent interview, Schlesinger had corroborated his version of the story. “He unequivocally confirms your account of what happened. Nothing that he saw or heard of second hand contradicts your account.” Kaplan continued that Schlesinger was “under the impression that your contact with the Kennedys stopped in November 1961.”⁴² In *Robert Kennedy and His Times* Schlesinger wrote that Jackie had “resolved not to have him at the White House again.”⁴³ However, Vidal had in his possession a letter from Jackie dated July 1962 that invited him to Hyannisport. When Kaplan showed the letter to Schlesinger, “[i]t startled him.”⁴⁴

Nevertheless, in the final analysis, the alteration of the details demonstrated to Vidal exactly how the Kennedy publicity machine worked. Vidal took the high-ground in *Palimpsest* and wrote that these were “people for whom truth is no criterion.”⁴⁵ The fundamental point however is that is that the conflict marked an end to Vidal’s place within the inner circle. The consequent abandonment dispelled the mystique of the Kennedy publicity machine and enabled Vidal to understand how the ruthless Kennedys maintained power.

⁴¹ John Kenneth Galbraith, *Ambassador’s Journal* (Boston, 1969), 255.

⁴² Fred Kaplan to Gore Vidal, October 31, 1996, GVC, M97-209, Box 1, Folder 14.

⁴³ Schlesinger, *Robert Kennedy and His Times*, 385.

⁴⁴ Kaplan to Vidal, October 31, 1996.

⁴⁵ *Palimpsest*, 395.

III

TWO INSTANCES IN THE CRITICAL HISTORY OF *MYRA BRECKINRIDGE*

In the article ‘*Myra Breckinridge*: A Study in Identity,’ (1969) published in *Journal of Popular Culture*, John F. and Mary Ann Wilhelm took the view that the novel was not erotic propaganda, as the newspaper reviewers had claimed, but a satire on the “wasteland of much contemporary life and the loss of identity as a consequence of popular American sex myths.” This hinges, they rightly identify, on the “widening gap between the complex present and assumed simplicity of the past.”⁴⁶ Whereas the critical reviews were, on the whole, fairly one-dimensional, the Wilhelms in 1969, and, following them, Purvis E. Boyette in 1971, argue that the novel is best understood through the more heterogeneous tradition of satire. “[I]f *Myra Breckinridge* is to be salvaged from the pornographer’s bin,” as Boyette wrote, “we shall have to look at it rather more seriously than the thousands who have read it for prurient reasons alone.”⁴⁷

Their subsequent conclusions however result from a reading of satire as a conservative rather than a subversive discipline. The Wilhelms are disconcerted by the contradictions that underline Myra’s theoretical narrative. While recognising that the argument of the novel hinges on the disparity between the iconography of Hollywood myth and “the complex present,” they ultimately miss the point. Myra’s hymn to the Andy Hardy series as “a last memorial to all that was touching and—yes—good in the American past”⁴⁸ is therefore dismissed as “remarkably naive for the sophisticated Myra.” What they do not recognise is that Myra is not the

⁴⁶ John and Mary Wilhelm, ‘*Myra Breckinridge*: A Study in Identity,’ *Journal of Popular Culture*, Volume III, Winter 1969, 590, 592.

⁴⁷ Purvis E. Boyette, ‘“*Myra Breckinridge*” and Imitative Form,’ *Modern Fiction Studies*, Summer 1971, 229.

⁴⁸ *MB*, 32.

organising principle of the satire, but that she is implicated in what is being satirised. Their conclusion that Vidal demonstrates how the “fantastically unreal myths of Hollywood” can lead “to a pathological and destructive way of life” is aimed at the character of Myra herself.⁴⁹ As such they interpret the end of the novel, Myron’s conclusion “that happiness, like the proverbial blackbird, is to be found in your backyard if you just know where to look,” as the coda, and, again, not an integral part of the satire.⁵⁰

Boyette however veered closer to a clearer understanding through his definition of satire. “The difference between novels that occasionally satirize and prose satires,” he stated, “is chiefly recognised when the form of the fiction becomes the image or figure of its content and thus, in fact, part of that content.” In other words, the form of the satire is determined by a deliberate reflection of the object it sets out to satirise. The character of Myra Breckinridge, and the factor led to her creation, Hollywood cinema, thus determines the form. With the work established within the tradition of Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*, Boyette argues that the “aesthetic criteria” of the reader is therefore “sharply altered.”⁵¹ As Fred Kaplan has observed, “Vidal’s inventions” are like the work of Sterne in that they “are uninhibitedly transgressive in regard to the novel as genre.” And yet they are “also, unlike Sterne, transgressive in their vision of human nature and the human situation.”⁵²

Boyette does not see this. Therefore, “quivering with fears of castration and anal penetration,”⁵³ as Catherine Stimpson mercilessly put it, he writes of the rape scene that

⁴⁹ Wilhelm, ‘Myra Breckinridge,’ 592.

⁵⁰ MB, 264.

⁵¹ Boyette, ‘Myra Breckinridge and Imitative Form,’ 229.

⁵² Fred Kaplan, ‘Introduction,’ *The Essential Gore Vidal*, xxiii.

⁵³ Catharine Stimpson, ‘My O My O Myra,’ *Writer Against the Grain*, ed. Parini, footnote 13, 302.

[t]he episode cannot be credited on any grounds of verisimilitude, for it is hard to believe that Rusty could not have escaped the event had he fought hard enough. As satire, however, the rape can be justified as a figurative rendering of the destructive power Hollywood has over the innate strength of native American stock.

In his attempt to read *Myra Breckinridge* within a conservative tradition of satire, Boyette shoots, as it were, wide of the mark. The object of the satire is that Hollywood underwrites the sexual identity of a masculine type such as Rusty. It is a Hollywood ideal, not some biologically determined “innate strength of American stock,” that is being assaulted in the rape scene. Myron’s rebirth as Myra moreover is an attempt to endorse that tradition. The result is that the tradition itself is satirised. Boyette is oblivious to this and also interprets Myron’s closing chapter as coda to the satire. “*Myra Breckinridge* is, Vidal tells us specifically, an attack on everything that Myra represents: a phony intellectual, a cultural bankrupt, and a sexual lunatic.”⁵⁴ It is not Vidal but the reborn conservative Myron who makes these claims in the final chapter. As the reviewers attacked Myra as Vidal’s explicit mouthpiece, so Boyette endorsed Myron.

⁵⁴ Boyette, ‘Myra Breckinridge and Imitative Form,’ 236, 231.

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